

Expert: Aging boomers may increase care burden on families

January 14 2010

(PhysOrg.com) -- As the U.S. Congress debates legislation on a health care system overhaul, one Penn State health expert sees an unavoidable crisis on the horizon. Chris Calkins, director of outreach health initiatives for Penn State, fears neither the House nor Senate bills fully address the strain on the system represented by the impending “tsunami” of geriatric health care needs.

The baby boomer generation is aging into Medicare, which is on the public budget, and that’s one in four people in the United States, Calkins said. Beginning Jan. 1, 2011, 10,000 people a day will become eligible. It’s an induction that will continue to happen every single day for 20 years.

“The current system is not designed to handle either the demand or the economics,” Calkins said. “We’ve got a classic imbalance between supply and demand,”

To put that in perspective, by the spring of 2014, about 12.5 million Americans - equal to the entire population of Pennsylvania - will be added to the Medicare roster. And that will happen five more times by the end of 2030.

As those numbers grow over the next two decades, Calkins predicts that more Americans will have to learn how to provide increased [health care](#) themselves, in their own homes—giving insulin shots, managing chemotherapy ports, providing transportation, and helping the elderly understand and pay for their care.

“Increasingly, it’s going to be people with no clinical training trying to care for their friends and family members,” he said.

Calkins understands the relationship between money and health in the U.S. as well as anybody. He has worked as a hospital administrator, a health policy professor at Penn State, and currently serves on Pennsylvania’s State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP) team. All this experience has led him to conclude that first and foremost, Americans need to become pro-active in their own health care—particularly in light of the extra strain of an [aging population](#).

“In addition to making [healthy lifestyle](#) choices,” Calkins advised, “people have to actively educate themselves, or they are setting themselves up for real grief.”

His advice? First, build a network of support—people you can trust to lend a hand when you need it most.

Second, understand your own health status as thoroughly as possible so you can advocate for yourself in an overtaxed system.

Third, if someone in your life is over 70 and healthy, speak to them now—not later—about exactly what their wishes are in regards to their care as they get older.

“Deal with it before it’s a crisis,” Calkins said. “No one wants to be that person standing out in the hospital hallway wringing their hands, trying to make a coherent life-or-death decision.”

Penn State Outreach serves more than 5 million people each year, delivering more than 2,000 programs to people in all 67 Pennsylvania counties, all 50 states and 80 countries worldwide.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Expert: Aging boomers may increase care burden on families (2010, January 14)
retrieved 7 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-01-expert-aging-boomers-burden-families.html>

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