Every Child Deserves Proper Healthcare

Mobile health team cares for uninsured children in central Texas.

Robert I. Bonar, Jr.

Of the 11 million uninsured children in the United States, more than 10 percent, or 1.4 million, live in Texas. Although uninsured children are concentrated along the Texas-Mexico border, the problem is far-reaching. In the 13-county region surrounding the central Texas city of Austin, more than 76,000 children have no health insurance. The majority of these children live with parents whose earnings are above the poverty level but not high enough to cover fundamental needs such as healthcare. Studies show that uninsured children often go without basic check-ups and frequently don’t seek care until easily treatable problems become more serious. In addition, these untreated conditions often affect school performance.

Taking Healthcare on the Road
To help our community’s children get the care they need, Children’s Hospital of Austin—a member of the SETON Healthcare Network and the area’s primary pediatric healthcare provider—established a partnership with the Austin Independent School District, which serves approximately 78,000 students. The Student Health Services Program is operated by a team of registered nurses and school health assistants who work closely with Austin ISD staff to provide care for students during school hours. This program also includes the Skippy Express Mobile Health Team, which offers free medical services to Austin ISD children and their siblings, from birth to 18 years of age, who are uninsured or who have no doctor. Skippy Express is funded by the Children’s Foundation, which solicits donations from area businesses and other community partners. The program is also part of the Children’s Health Fund, a national network of pediatric mobile healthcare clinics.

The 40-foot Skippy Express clinic van makes regular visits to underprivileged areas with a high concentration of Hispanic and Vietnamese children. This on-site approach is successful because it goes beyond the traditional method of delivering healthcare. By bringing healthcare services to where people live, work, and go to school, we can overcome barriers—such as language, education, lack of transportation, and the inability to miss work—that prevent parents from obtaining proper healthcare for their children.

Made up of bilingual nurses and pediatric nurse-practitioners, the Skippy Express team works closely with school nurses and health assistants to identify children in need of medical services, including vision and hearing screenings, sports physicals, minor acute illness care, well-child examinations, immunizations, and referrals to primary, specialty, and mental healthcare professionals. Navigating the healthcare system without health insurance can be difficult, so Skippy Express staff work with parents to help them understand the importance of obtaining consistent healthcare for the whole family, and they encourage parents to apply for Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program, or other community service benefits. In addition, the Skippy Express van features a Class D pharmacy, allowing children to obtain prescription medication immediately.

Celebrating Success
Last year, Skippy Express provided medical care and immunizations to approximately 4,000 children who might otherwise not have received any healthcare services at all. To understand the difference that our mobile health team makes, consider the story of a six-year-old girl who visited Skippy Express for a well-child examination. Because her mother was unable to care for her, the child had lived with her grandmother for several years before moving in with an aunt. During the examination, the nurse-practitioner noticed that the child was quite short for her age. The nurse-practitioner subsequently discovered that the girl had been born without a thyroid and was suffering from congenital hypothyroidism. Although the child’s condition had been detected at birth and she had been given medication as an infant, her grandmother was unaware that the girl would need the medication for the rest of her life.

A consult visit was arranged with the Skippy Express pediatrician, who prescribed medication that was made available through an expense voucher program. In addition, the child was sent to an endocrinologist for assistance in managing her thyroid hormone imbal-
ance. Skippy Express staff also helped the child’s aunt apply for Medicaid benefits and find a primary care physician. Without this collaborative effort, there is no telling how long this child’s severe medical condition would have gone untreated. Through the Skippy Express Mobile Health Team, Children’s Hospital is fulfilling its mission to provide high-quality medical care to all, regardless of their ability to pay.

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September 15, 2004

Mr. Robert E. Tillman
Chief Executive Officer
Eastern Shore Hospital
1100 Front Avenue
Easton, MD 21601

Dear Mr. Tillman:

I am sure you have a program for monitoring and responding to adverse drug events, but does your program:

- Meet our patient safety goals;
- Save $$$;
- Satisfy JCAHO’s new patient safety requirements;
- And access a national database of 750,000 records?

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Sincerely yours,

[Signature]

Jeffrey R. Silverstone
Program Director, Patient Safety Products

FROM THE DESK OF
Robert E. Tillman
C.O.O., Eastern Shore Hospital