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Physician specialists hard to find for many Valley residents

A new study from California State University, Fresno, reports medical specialist services are difficult to obtain for high-risk patients in underserved areas of the San Joaquin Valley. The result for many patients can be disastrous.

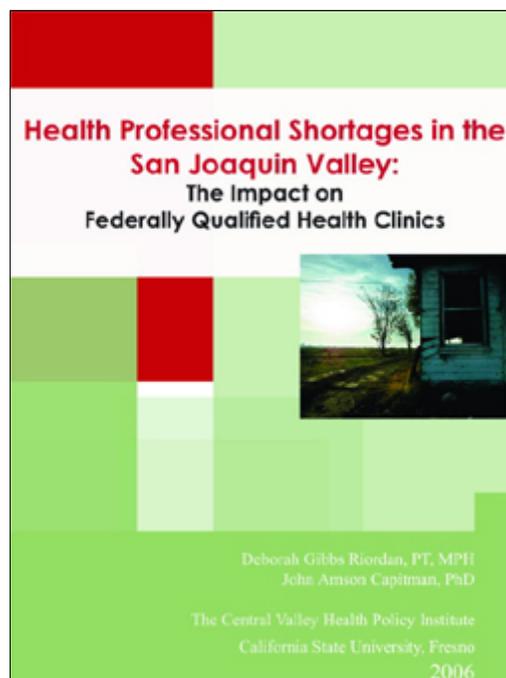
"The care of uninsured and Medi-Cal patients is made more difficult when we require, but are unable to access, specialty care. This not only results in delayed treatment, but, I suspect, a higher morbidity and mortality rate," explained Dr. Patricia Quintana-Van Horne, chief medical officer of Sequoia Community Health Centers in Fresno.

The report, "Health Professional Shortages in the San Joaquin Valley: The Impact on Federally Qualified Health Clinics," was released today by the Central Valley Health Policy Institute at Fresno State. In an effort to respond to regional concerns regarding health professional shortages and the effect of these shortages on the health of Valley residents, the institute conducted an in-depth survey of eight Federally Qualified Health Clinics (FQHCs) in the Valley.

An FQHC receives both Medicare and Medicaid funding to provide primary care services to high-risk populations in underserved areas. There are more than 125 licensed rural health, migrant health and Indian health clinics and FQHCs in the Valley that provide key services to those in need of accessible and affordable care in the study area from San Joaquin through Kern counties.

The institute's analysis, using 2005 data from the American Medical Association, revealed that there were 43 specialists per 100,000 persons in the San Joaquin Valley, compared to the statewide average of 87 per 100,000 and as many as 122 per 100,000 greater Bay Area residents. Physician specialists practice in medical, OBGYN, psychiatric, surgical and other areas.

All Valley sites reported difficulty providing referrals to specialists, limiting the ability to provide health care to patients. FQHCs reported that access to specialists was



difficult for their Medi-Cal and uninsured patients the majority of the time for all specialties except nephrology (kidney disorders). All clinics cited low reimbursement rates from Medi-Cal and county indigent care programs as extremely important in limiting patient access to specialists.

“FQHCs are using a number of strategies to decrease the impact of specialist shortages including expansion of funding opportunities, participating in the Health Disparities Collaboratives Program and expanding their use of technology,” said Deborah Riordan, health policy analyst at the Central Valley Health Policy Institute and lead author of the report.

Riordan noted that the most common solution suggested by clinics to alleviate the specialist shortage problem was to modify and increase reimbursement rates for specialists.

Fresno State’s Health Professional Shortages report will help to provide direction to policy makers and will play a critical role in informing health policy reform decisions in the region.

The Central Valley Health Policy Institute facilitates an interactive regional process to identify, monitor and analyze emerging health policy issues affecting people living in Central California. Funding for this report was made possible by a grant from The California Endowment.

For more information contained in this release, please go to the following Web sites:

[Central Valley Health Policy Institute](#)