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VIM patients say others too embarrassed to seek free health care, IU survey finds

By Dann Denny 331-4350 | ddenny@heraldt.com Feb 16, 2012



From left, Elizabeth Thompson, Oren Pizmony-Levy and Kathleen Oberlin stand outside the Volunteers in Medicine health clinic. Courtesy photo.

A new IU study of more than 700 patients of the Volunteers in Medicine free health clinic found that nearly a third of the respondents think people in the community feel there's a social stigma associated with seeking free health care services.

The study, conducted by Indiana University sociologists, showed that while 91 percent of VIM patients said they were not embarrassed about using free health services, 29 percent said they felt “other people” would be embarrassed to admit they sought free health care; and 50 percent said they know at least one person who is uninsured and eligible for services but not currently a VIM patient.

“We were surprised that more of our patients didn’t say that they themselves would be a little embarrassed about utilizing free health care, but saying others would be embarrassed is likely an indication of how they really feel about the issue but didn’t want to admit it,” said Elizabeth Thompson, VIM’s former executive director who resigned last week. “And we hear from our patients that they know others who qualify for our services but don’t use them because they feel they should be able to take care of themselves, and that using free health care services would be taking advantage of society.”

Kathleen Oberlin, a doctoral student in IU’s department of sociology who helped conduct the study, said the discrepancy is not surprising, because people’s perceptions of themselves are often different from their perceptions of others.

“The people surveyed were VIM patients, so they clearly did not see embarrassment as a big enough obstacle to prevent them from using the services,” she said. “But they perceive that others would be embarrassed.”

Researcher Oren Pizmony-Levy, another doctoral student in IU’s department of sociology who helped with the study, said the “societal stigma against publicly seeking free health services is an important factor in people’s decision to seek available resources, like Volunteers in Medicine of Monroe County. This inherent belief that seeking free services is bad means that programs like the VIM need to focus on addressing this issue with a public campaign.”

Thompson said the study indicates that VIM must “remodel its message and reach out to people who qualify for the clinic but aren’t using it, to let them know that we are here to help and they shouldn’t be embarrassed about coming here.”

Economic demographics

The survey of 741 VIM patients who visited the clinic between December 2009 and February 2011 also uncovered a diverse socioeconomic demographic — with 56 percent of the clinic’s patients being employed and 46 percent having some form of higher education, ranging from a few college courses to an advanced degree.

“This broad demographic base VIM serves flies in the face of commonly held assumptions, and suggests the health care crisis is far-reaching and severe,” Oberlin said.

Oberlin said the VIM clinic could help educate the community about the diversity of its patient base with a creative bus sign campaign, or through videos played in the clinic’s waiting room.

“The more informed VIM patients are, the more effectively they can be advocates for the clinic,” she said.

Thompson said the study's finding that 47 percent of respondents said they had an annual family income less than \$10,000 might help shatter the stigma that those seeking free health care are societal sponges afraid of hard work. Many have jobs but don't earn enough to afford health insurance, she said, or work for employers who don't offer health insurance.

High patient satisfaction

The study also shows that the majority of VIM patients are satisfied with the services they receive at the clinic — with 8 of 10 respondents providing positive feedback regarding their experiences at the clinic.

"We are pleased with that finding because it shows we are doing a good job," Thompson said. "We feel that positive feedback from our patients to their family and friends is one of the reasons our patient volume has grown over the years, but we would like to reach even more people through our patients."

The VIM clinic provides free health care and low-cost prescription medications to uninsured people in Monroe and Owen counties whose income is 200 percent of the federal poverty line (roughly \$44,700 for a family of four). It now serves 60 percent of eligible residents in the two counties — compared with just 6 percent when the clinic opened in 2007.

"We've seen our patient volume climb steadily since 2007," Thompson said. "We would naturally like to reach everyone who needs our services. We're nearly at capacity now, but our patients are not static. We see people come for a while, then maybe leave, and then maybe come back later."

Oberlin said the clinic's robust physician and layperson volunteer base, convenient on-site pharmacy and ability to refer patients needing more extensive care to physician offices throughout the community all contribute to the high patient-satisfaction rate.

"I and my colleagues were happy to see that overall VIM patients are overwhelmingly satisfied with their experiences at the clinic," she said. "It's rewarding to see how everyone in the community is working together to address the health care needs of this population, and that the clinic is not only meeting but exceeding patient expectations."

Proactive patient base

Thompson said she was pleased with the survey's finding that 66 percent of VIM's patients during the past year took the initiative to seek health care information — from the Internet, medical professionals, family and/or friends.

"This is a good thing, because we want our patients to become more engaged in the maintenance of their own health," she said. "But there is still room for improvement in that area."

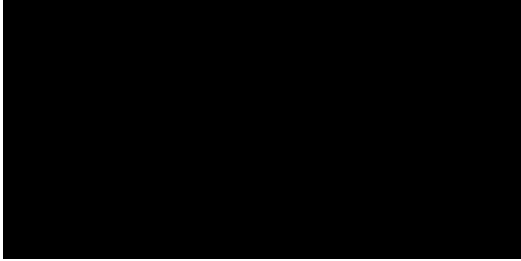
The survey shows that more women than men, and more whites than nonwhites, are prone to seek health care information.

About VIM

The first VIM free medical clinic was established in 1996 in South Carolina. Today, there are more than 75 VIM clinics in the United States.

The Monroe County VIM clinic is open to the more than 12,000 individuals in Monroe and Owen counties who are eligible for its services. The clinic, operated by volunteers with support from IU Health Bloomington Hospital and the community, provides primary and preventive services and low-cost medications. It handles more than 20,000 patient visits each year.

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