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Clinic is there for those in need

Our opinion Feb 18, 2012

A large majority of patients who use the Bloomington Volunteers in Medicine free health clinic appreciate the facility and are satisfied with the care they get. But half of them also say they know people who are eligible to use the clinic but don't do so.

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

The more than 700 VIM patients who responded to a recent survey point to a possible reason for the reluctance: a perceived social stigma of seeking free health care services.

That's an unfortunate perception. The local Volunteers in Medicine clinic was founded in 2007 by a group of people who felt strongly that everyone is entitled to good health care no matter their economic circumstances. That's why they organized, planned, raised money and volunteered for a clinic that serves uninsured low-income people in Monroe and Owen counties.

The message that VIM is available in a nonjudgmental way for all people who need it must be made more clear. That's one of the conclusions of Oren Pizmony-Levy, an IU doctoral student who helped with the study and told the H-T's Dann Denny: "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."

The study also dispels the notion that only the uneducated and unemployed need health care services. Fifty-six percent of the patients have jobs, while just under half — 46 percent — have attended at least some college.

In other words, the health care crisis is both deep and broad.

VIM has been a major force in Monroe and Owen counties, seeing its patient load climb steadily to about 20,000 patient visits a year. It serves uninsured people whose income is no more than 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

The survey indicates those it has served are satisfied customers. That's just another reason why those who need medical services should not hesitate to walk in for help.

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