

Bill Kaplan: COVID threatens stressed health care system

Posted on Monday, May 23, 2022

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COVID is surging: CDC said one-third of Americans should consider masking as COVID cases rise nationally to over 100,000 cases a day (over 2,000 in Wisconsin); hospitalizations are up sharply; (total) deaths are increasing, adding to the national toll of over one million dead nationally (almost 13,000 in Wisconsin). Despite this catastrophe, millions remain fully or partially unvaccinated.

“The more people who are unvaccinated and infected, the more chances there are for mutations (variants) to occur” (Johns Hopkins Medicine). Moreover, getting COVID is not the same as a cold. Long COVID is worrisome leading to serious heart, lung, neurological and other medical problems. This tragedy could be mitigated if everyone got fully vaccinated, including booster shots. A Commonwealth Fund study showed that vaccinations have prevented 66 million COVID cases, avoided 17 million hospitalizations and prevented 2.2 million deaths.

Our doctors, nurses and other health care workers are worn-out. Many have had enough and are retiring. The entire health care system is under enormous financial strain. Expiration of federal pandemic funding for rural hospitals means many will fail, including 7 in Wisconsin (Center for health care Quality and Payment Reform). Future Medicare payment cuts, inadequate private insurance payments, lack of Medicaid expansion in Wisconsin and 11 other states spells disaster for rural hospitals.

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On top of that Congress still has not agreed to a COVID funding deal for vaccines,

treatments and tests. Republicans have dragged their feet and obstructed. Incredibly, the House held a recent hearing on UFOs. Wisconsin GOP Representative Mike Gallagher was aghast about an unexplained UFO incident in 1967. Gallagher is vaccinated and no dim bulb. He should get off his soap box and help pass COVID funding legislation.

Moreover, there are other threats ahead. A new study by Families USA, based on data from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, is alarming. Enhanced tax credits for Affordable Care Act (ACA) private insurance expire at the end of 2022. This critical funding was in the American Rescue Plan passed by the Democratic-led Congress. It helped middle and working class Americans reduce their ACA private insurance premiums. But if Congress doesn't act annual premiums will skyrocket nationally 53 per cent and 56 per cent in Wisconsin. The average annual premium cost could rise by \$1,080 in Wisconsin (Families USA).

Then there is the likely end to pandemic Medicaid coverage. States got a big boost in federal Medicaid funding, but were required to maintain Medicaid coverage for the newly enrolled. If the COVID public health emergency is allowed to end millions nationally and hundreds of thousands in Wisconsin would lose coverage. Thankfully, last week the Biden administration signaled the public health emergency will be extended for a few more months. Still a huge problem down the road.

Given all of the above one would think that the Wisconsin GOP-led Legislature would come to its senses and join 38 other states (many GOP-led) in expanding Medicaid. Not a chance. They do not care about regular folks or rural Wisconsin as health care disasters loom ahead.

- Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.