Childbirth Is a Top Expense for Illegal Immigrants

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WASHINGTON — The first study of emergency Medicaid expenditures for illegal immigrants shows that childbirth is the most expensive component. However, at least in North Carolina, that expense amounted to less than 1% of the state's Medicaid budget, showing that state and federal authorities are not pouring huge amounts of dollars into providing care for undocumented immigrants, Dr. C. Annette DuBard, the study's lead author, said at a media briefing presented by the Journal of the American Medical Association.

With debate growing over whether states should pay for illegal immigrants' health care, Dr. DuBard, a research associate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Dr. Mark W. Massing of the Carolinas Center for Medical Excellence in Cary, N.C., set out to document the expenditures. They published their results in a special issue of JAMA devoted to access to care issues (JAMA 2007;297:1085-92).

North Carolina experienced a 274% increase in its foreign-born population during the 1990s. From 2001 to 2004, 48,000 undocumented immigrants received emergency Medicaid services in North Carolina. Overall, spending rose from $41 million in 2001 to $53 million in 2004.

Childbirth and complications of pregnancy accounted for 86% of total expenditures in 2001, dropping to 82% in 2004. Given that most children born to illegal immigrants are granted citizenship, it "calls into question the rationale of excluding this population from comprehensive contraceptive and prenatal care coverage," the authors said.

Eight states provide coverage for prenatal care under the State Children's Health Insurance Program and five other states cover prenatal care regardless of immigration status, according to the authors. ■