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Minnesota / Care for publicly insured still lags

But quality improving in some areas

By: Jeremy Olson, Pioneer Press

Poor Minnesotans continue to receive worse health care than richer residents who can afford private health insurance, according to Minnesota Community Measurement's second annual health disparities report.

The care of privately insured patients was better in eight areas of health care, including asthma management and breast cancer screening, than it was for patients receiving publicly subsidized health benefits.

Health care officials saw signs of encouragement in the report, however, because many clinics improved the quality of care they provided for all patients in 2007 and reduced the income disparities at the same time.

Clinics gave timely immunizations to 80 percent of privately insured children and to 72 percent of publicly insured children in 2007, according to figures released Monday. While this was a disparity of 8 percentage points, it was substantially better than the 15-point disparity in 2006.

"The medical groups are paying attention," said Anne Snowden, director of performance measurement and reporting for Minnesota Community Measurement. "They care about (the results) because they're being compared to their peers ... and they want to do right by their patients."

Park Nicollet, in fact, provided timely immunizations to 90 percent of publicly insured children, compared to 88 percent of privately insured children in 2007.

The disparities widened — ever so slightly — in the management of asthma and diabetes by Minnesota clinics. Fourteen percent of privately insured diabetics were kept at optimal health in 2007 compared to only 8 percent of publicly insured diabetics.

A ninth measure in the report showed a greater frequency of chlamydia testing among public patients, mostly because the sexually transmitted disease is more common in urban, low-income sections of the state.

Snowden said clinics need to identify and support patients with unique needs. Forgetful patients may need appointment reminders. Spanish-speaking patients may need interpreters.

Examples include same-day mammographies at HealthPartners clinics that eliminate transportation barriers for lower-income women. A focus on frequent and even repeated blood

pressure checks paid off for Allina Medical Clinics, which kept 70 percent of privately and publicly funded patients at healthy levels in 2007.

Jeremy Olson can be reached at 651-228-5583.