

## Health care gamble

Being young and uninsured in the Capital Region means taking risks

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As health care reform works its way through Congress, people like Pat McGowin of Troy and Sally Block of Albany are tuned to its progress. They are among the more than 18 million young adults without health insurance in America, according to the California-based Kaiser Family Foundation's Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured.

Two years after a brush with bad leafy greens, McGowin, 25, was still paying the hospital bill for his case of food poisoning. He worked out a payment plan to cover the \$600 bill, which allowed him to remit about \$40 each month, including interest, until the bill was paid.

Other than the food poisoning and an aggressive snowboarding stunt that resulted in a back injury so horrific McGowin couldn't stand for several days, he's been healthy. As a result, McGowin hasn't made health insurance a priority. Instead of paying for private insurance, he goes to the doctor only when he "can't bear it anymore." Then, and only then, he'll head over to an urgent care center.

"At that point I'll pay any amount of money to get rid of what's bothering me," says McGowin, who handles production and promotion as the assistant manager of Revolution Hall in Troy. The company has only six full-time employees, too few to make a group health insurance plan financially feasible.

McGowin has passed on federal or state-subsidized insurance plans, such as Healthy New York, reasoning he's relatively healthy and doesn't want to add another cost to his monthly student loan, rent and car payments.

For a single adult in the Capital Region, Healthy New York standard coverage costs about \$265 a month for the plan that includes prescriptions. Without drug coverage, it's about \$232. You have to be employed, or have been within the last 12 months, to qualify. The standard plan includes a \$100 deductible for prescriptions and a \$20 copay for doctors visits.

McGowin is hoping federal health care reform will make health coverage less expensive.

Block doesn't qualify for Healthy New York. The 26-year-old college graduate has been uninsured since losing her full-time job as a customer service representative for Lexis Nexis in Albany two years ago. She remains jobless despite applying for dozens of

positions, and works temporary jobs until she finds something permanent. For now, she is on welfare.

Block calls herself "pretty healthy" and visits the doctor about once a year. She goes to Planned Parenthood to receive her annual OB/GYN appointment for free. The group offers reduced or no-cost care to women under its Family Planning Benefits Program.

What isn't free are migraine and depression medications -- prescriptions she needs to function.

Block's dad helps her pay her \$200-a-month prescription bill, but she's also taken to gambling with her medications. She says she can skip two to three days of her headache or depression drugs without serious complications. Any more than that, though, and Block ends up stuck in the house, blinds drawn, wishing she were like her friends who are employed and insured. She has applied for Medicaid, which would cover most of her medical costs, and is waiting for approval.

Although it is true that, on average, younger adults have fewer health care needs than older adults, there are still important reasons for people within the age group to obtain health insurance, says Cori Uccello, a senior health fellow at The American Academy of Actuaries, based in Washington, D.C. She points to a survey the not-for-profit did on health care costs. The average 18-to-24-year-old spends about \$1,440 a year on medical bills, including prescriptions. A 25-to-34-year-old spends around \$2,100 annually. The figures include all individuals, regardless of insurance status (so those with low, or no, deductible or copays are included), meaning many people pay much more.

"Insurance can protect against the financial costs associated with unexpected and catastrophic health care needs," Uccello says. "Even seemingly healthy people can become ill or have an accident that requires expensive health care services."

Bills that can result if you do fall ill -- or are injured -- can be financially crushing, says Steven Bouchey, a financial planner for Bouchey Financial Group in Troy, especially if you are unemployed or working at an entry-level, minimum-wage job.

Like any financial planner, Bouchey considers "debt" one of the dirty, four-letter words. But, he points out, if the decision is between your health, and carrying a balance on a credit card because of health insurance costs, the latter is worth it.

"Your health is more important than money," says Bouchey. "Forget about how much money you have. If you don't have your health, you have nothing."

When people are deciding between having health insurance and risking going without it, he says, he always advises them to go with the health plan, since you cannot plan or predict when you may get sick.

But what about people who say they can't afford insurance? Bouchey suggests they look

into a high-deductible plan, or Healthy NY, which is for lower-income adults. The guidelines say applicants can make up to 250 percent of the federal poverty level, which means a salary of about \$27,000 a year or less.

High-deductible plans work just as they do for car insurance. The monthly payment is minimal, but the deductible at the doctor's office, hospital or pharmacy is higher than with a standard plan. If a person is young, healthy and does not rely on maintenance drugs for diseases such as high cholesterol or blood pressure, diabetes or mental health, then the coverage is fine.

Someday, though, you may not be fine. As Bouchey says, the most debilitating illnesses or injuries often arrive without warning. But many recent college graduates, often referred to as "young invincibles" because many believe they can't get sick, don't feel that's enough motivation for them to pay several hundred dollars a month for health insurance.

In the meantime, McGowin, Block and millions of Americans will continue to gamble with their health, weighing the options between paying now for protection they may not need or, perhaps, ending up like McGowin and paying for one bad meal for years.

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#### Health care options

Choices exist for people seeking health insurance. Here are a some:

**Healthy NY:** A state-funded program designed to make reduced-cost, comprehensive health insurance available to people who either work for small employers who do not provide health insurance, or who meet requirements based on low income. For more information, check out <http://www.healthny.com>.

**eHealthInsurance.com:** The online health insurance marketplace offers health insurance quotes from dozens of providers and lets people compare health plans and purchase them online. For more information, log on to [eHealthInsurance.com](http://eHealthInsurance.com).

**The "Age 29" law:** At the end of July, Gov. Paterson signed a law allowing young adults to obtain health insurance coverage through their parents' plan through the age of 29. This program is designed for young adults who do not have access to employer-sponsored health insurance. For more information, log on to [http://www.ins.state.ny.us/health/S6030\\_Age29.htm](http://www.ins.state.ny.us/health/S6030_Age29.htm).

#### Care expenses

Health costs rise with age, but serious accidents or illness can occur at any stage of life.

0 to 17 \$1,333

18 to 24 \$1,441

25 to 34 \$2,103

35 to 44 \$2,492

45 to 54 \$3,992

55 to 64 \$5,996

65-plus \$8,776

All \$3,451

Source: American Academy of Actuaries, Medical Expenditure Panel Survey, 2006