

# Illegal Aliens: The Health Cost Dimension

by Joe Guzzardi

**S**aul Diaz was a penniless, unemployed, uninsured illegal alien living in Georgia when he was severely injured in a car accident. During his year-long hospitalization, Diaz racked up \$1 million in medical expenses.

Officials tried to return Diaz to Mexico after he was stabilized. But Diaz died before he could be removed.

The Gwinnett (GA.) Hospital System expects more illegal immigrants will present themselves for urgent care this year and has established a \$34 million reserve to cover its outlay.

Said Paula Martin, a hospital representative:

“When patients come in the emergency department, we do not know or ask if they are documented, we are obligated to deliver care regardless of their status. And as you know, some

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people do not admit to being illegally in the U.S.”

[*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Indigent care costs escalating; “Hospitals don't track illegal immigrant factor,” by Rick Badie, January 16, 2003]

Okay, you say, we just can't let Diaz die on the highway. As humanitarians we must try to save him.

But take a hypothetical “Gloria,” a twenty-year old Los Angeles resident who is seven months pregnant? Like Diaz, Gloria is uninsured, unemployed and illegally in the U.S.

Medi-Cal will cover Gloria's prenatal care and child delivery costs.

If Gloria doesn't speak English, the hospital must, by law, provide her with a Spanish-speaking translator.

Gloria's newborn child will also get car seats and diapers under her Medi-Cal coverage.

In the event of post-partum complications, California will absorb all of the costs.

U.S. taxpayers have spent hundred of millions on patients like Diaz and Gloria. As a consequence, the states are facing a crisis of unparalleled magnitude. As *Los Angeles Times* columnist Ronald Brownstein wrote in his December

30 column “Health-Care Storm Brewing in California Threatens to Swamp U.S.”, “the impending Medicaid disaster is not a problem the states can handle alone; their budget shortfalls are too big.”

If you want to reduce the cost of quality health care for U.S. citizens then you cannot provide it to every illegal alien in the country.

And if the government can turn its back on health care for military veterans, as it announced it would last week, then cutting off aliens shouldn't be too tough.

On January 17<sup>th</sup>, Secretary of Veteran Affairs Anthony J. Principi stated that VA health care enrollment for Category 8 veterans would be suspended for one year. (A Category 8 veteran is one who does not have a service-connected disability and has an income in excess of \$13,000.)

World War II veteran Bob Simmons predicts that “one year” means forever.

In justifying his decision, Principi noted that more than 200,000 veterans have to wait six months for an initial appointment and that in today's economy many veterans “may have a false expectation of care.”

There's a slice of American life circa 2003: veterans wait while illegal aliens go to the head of the

line.

U.S. Marine Corps Captain David Brockett who served in Vietnam more than once between 1968 and 1974 e-mailed me his observation:

*The G.W. Bush decision to cut VA health care costs while funneling millions of dollars into health care for illegals is a kick in the gut. This decision is indicative of the 'I appreciate your past service but what have you done for me today' attitude that veteran's organizations fight each and every year.*

*All veterans and their families are painfully aware of the uphill struggle to obtain medical services at Veteran's Affairs hospitals and clinics. We have to provide a ream of personal, financial, and military documentation just to get "in" the system. Once the information is validated then we are informed what our "share" of the medical expenses will be. If we submit the information in March, and we lose our job in April, we have to wait a full year for the VA to reassess our co-payment. With past funding cuts it is not unusual for a veteran to have to travel across several counties to reach a VA medical center.*

*Meanwhile, the illegal simply presents himself to the nearest hospital for a complete smorgasbord of*

*free medical services. This "squatter" enjoys all of the freedoms that the veteran has fought for, with none of the pain, suffering, or expenses associated with them..*

*Several generations of this type of neglect has produced children of veterans who are cautioned against serving in the military. Simple solution to this problem is for our government representatives to receive the same health care services that veterans do. Let's see how long they will be willing to rob Peter to pay Raoul.*

But there may be rays of hope. At the encouragement of Rep. Jim Kolbe, R-Arizona, the General Accounting Office traveled to southern Arizona to study the impact of illegal immigrants on Arizona and other border state hospitals. In 2002, three hospitals located in Cochise County funded more than \$1 million in uncompensated health care costs, said Jim Dickson, CEO of the Copper Queen Community Hospital in Bisbee.

The Florida Hospital Association surveyed 28 hospitals and found that health care for illegal aliens totaled at least \$40 million in 2002. Among the changes recommended are:

- Specifying how much follow-up care a hospital must provide after stabilizing the patient.
- Requiring that tourist visas be issued only if the applicants document their health status, assume financial responsibility for

health care and agree to return home after they are stabilized.

- Requiring other countries to accept medical transfers of their citizens.
- Receiving more cooperation from and among the INS, foreign consulates, immigration lawyers and patients' families. (Good luck on this one!)

Rep. Mark Foley, R-Fla. has the best idea. [*"Congressman: 'Parasitic' Illegal Aliens Burden U.S. Hospitals,"* Jessica Cantelon, *CNSNews.com* July 16, 2002.] Foley said that the U.S. should net hospital costs out of foreign aid payments.

Immigration enthusiasts, of course, do not agree. Hector Cora, lawyer for the family of Saul Diaz, the \$1 million illegal I mentioned in my first paragraph was quoted in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article as saying:

*It's nice to brush it off on them (illegal aliens)... But, they contribute to Georgia's labor, economy, and pay taxes. Most of the time, when they go to hospitals, it's going to be for delivering babies and critical-type care. You're talking about a community that's almost completely unaware they are driving up hospital costs. They are not educated enough to know what the costs are, and that they are high. You're basically talking about uneducated people from a Third World country.*

Hmmm, interesting that the Diaz family has money for a lawyer but

not for hospital bills.

Illegal immigrants may not know much about medical care.

But one thing they do know: they get a better deal in the U.S. than they do in Mexico. •