

Kidney disease costs lives, dollars

EDITORIAL

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The number of Americans on kidney dialysis is expected to double from 300,000-plus in 2000 to 650,000 by decade's end. The cost in public and private health-care dollars is already about \$25 billion annually. In Louisiana, 7,400 people are on dialysis, with an estimated 1,200 of those in the local region.

The decade doubling is partly a factor of aging baby boomers, but often boomers with lousy nutrition and inactive lifestyles, done in by hypertension and obesity-related diabetes and heart disease.

Pending before Congress is the Kidney Care Quality and Improvement Act designed to meet the financial reality of this growing health crisis, allowing Medicare payment rates to keep pace with technology and cost changes. According to U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, D-La., a co-sponsor of H.R. 1298, 75 percent of all dialysis patients nationwide are Medicare patients and dialysis costs are rising faster than Medicare reimbursements. That makes it increasingly more difficult to provide services to low-income patients. The proposed act would also remove barriers to home dialysis.

Perhaps as important, the proposed amendment to Social Security regulations also would create patient education initiatives to increase awareness about chronic kidney disease and to help patients learn self-management skills.

Education and awareness are crucial. About 7.4 million people have less than half the kidney function of a healthy young adult. Another 11.3 million have at least half of what's considered normal function, but they also have persistent protein in their urine, a sign of kidney disease. Scarier is that 10 million to 20 million have kidney disease but don't know it.

Among demographic groups, blacks are four times more likely than whites to develop kidney failure. Furthermore, diabetes and high blood pressure account for 70 percent of kidney failure in blacks.

Because diabetes and high blood pressure run in families, the National Kidney Disease Education Foundation is making a push this summer to encourage those attending reunions to work in discussions of kidney disease history during picnic lunch or while leafing through photo albums.

Across all demographic groups, lack of insurance can contribute to the lack of diagnoses. Insufficient nutrition education can exacerbate high blood pressure and obesity, two health issues in which Louisiana unfortunately rates high.

Taxpayers picking up more of the tab for those on fixed incomes predisposed to kidney ailments or other contributory diseases is one thing. But those who end up in end-stage renal disease because of preventable ailments represent a frustrating expense to a nation in need of dollars for education, infrastructure and public safety. There is no substitute for personal responsibility, but that is made easier by awareness and education. And prevention, from a taxpayer investment, is cheaper than treatment.

Avoiding dialysis

For more information about kidney disease, contact the National Kidney Disease Education Program at 1-866-454-3639