



# HEALTH POLICY PROGRAM

## ISSUE BRIEF

March 2008

# HEALTH CARE REPORTING GUIDE FOR JOURNALISTS

© New America Foundation, 2008. All rights reserved.\*

By Joanne Kenen

---

For reporters new to the health beat – or for political or business reporters who need to delve into health policy now and then – the topic can be daunting. Luckily, there are many, many resources on the web, useful whether you are in Washington or around the country. We'll share some tips here about what you should know and where to find answers, and we'll add to this as the debate about coverage, cost and quality evolves. If you find yourself drowning in jargon and acronyms, it helps to take a breath and remember that health care is about people, and that it affects every one of us, and everyone we care about.

---

## DEMYSTIFYING COMMON HEALTH CARE CONCEPTS

**Universal Coverage v. Universal Access.** One common error is that even some very good writers don't understand what "universal coverage" or "universal health care" means. It simply means that everyone will be insured. That's it. It does not mean a "single-payer" system, a government takeover of health care, or a British- or Canadian-style system. In this country in the foreseeable future, we are much more likely to achieve universal coverage through a hybrid system of public and private sector programs, like many European industrialized countries.

Conservatives may promote "universal access" not universal coverage. Watch out. They aren't the same thing. We already have universal access. Anyone with enough money can buy insurance. As 47 million uninsured people can attest, access is not coverage.

**More Care ≠ Better Care.** By some estimates, about one-third of the money we spend on health care is wasted. There are also studies that show how some states spend a lot more money on health care than others – but their outcomes aren't any better, and by some measures are worse. The Dartmouth Atlas Project is an excellent resource for how medical resources are distributed and used in the United States. The project is run by The Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy and Clinical Practice (TDI). Their website (<http://www.dartmouthatlas.org>) has a wealth of information — data banks for those with the number-crunching skills to analyze spending trends in your own communities and easily-accessible reports and issue briefs for those who prefer words to numbers. Shannon Brownlee, a colleague in New America's fellowship program, writes about this in her book "Overtreated."

**Controlling Costs.** We spend \$2 trillion on health care a year – one in every six dollars in the U.S. economy – and it's getting worse. We can't afford that – at least we can't afford to spend that on a system that still doesn't cover 47 million people, leaves our emergency rooms bursting at the seams, frays our safety net, undervalues primary care, fails to coordinate care for people with multiple complex conditions, leaves families providing billions in uncompensated care for the elderly, and so on. And, until the emerging field of comparative effectiveness takes hold, we are spending a lot of money on expensive new therapies and treatments that may or may not make us any healthier than the old ones. No matter whether you are a conservative who wants to shrink government spending or a liberal who wants to spend money on a host of other priorities in our country and the world, we should all be able to agree that \$2 trillion and counting in the current health care system is not good for our country.

We could go on – and in the coming weeks and months we will. In the meantime, here are some practical tools.

\*This paper carries a Creative Commons license, which permits non-commercial re-use when proper attribution is provided. For details, please see <http://www.newamerica.net/about/copyright>.

\*\* Joanne Kenen is a Senior Writer with the Health Policy Program at the New America Foundation.

## **RESOURCES**

*New America Foundation* [http://www.newamerica.net/programs/health\\_policy](http://www.newamerica.net/programs/health_policy).

The New America health policy web site has background materials and issue briefs covering the basics – what is an individual mandate, who are the uninsured and why does insurance matter in the first place. We're working on more (and welcome your suggestions on what would be useful to you). Please also visit The New Health Dialogue blog <http://www.newamerica.net/blog/health>

*Alliance for Health Reform* <http://www.allhealth.org/>.

Terrific web-based resources for reporters and policy staff. Since 1991 this nonpartisan, nonprofit organization has been sponsoring briefings and developing “took kits” and reports. They will help reporters locate expert sources, and their website includes source lists and guides to all the players in health care, interest groups and think tanks across the political spectrum. They also have a useful health care glossary appended to their Covering Health Issues (2006-2007) Guidebook.

*Kaiser Family Foundation* [www.KFF.org](http://www.KFF.org).

The nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation (unrelated to the Kaiser Permanente health plans) conducts its own independent research and gathers a wealth of global and national health policy data and information on a linked series of web sites. Reporters and policymakers can subscribe to free, daily or weekly reports and digests. Its [http://www.kaisernetnetwork.org/health\\_cast/hcast\\_index.cfm](http://www.kaisernetnetwork.org/health_cast/hcast_index.cfm) has both podcasts and webcasts of a wide range of health events (transcripts are available of webcasts).

*National Health Policy Forum at George Washington University* <http://www.nhpf.org/>.

This is by no means the only university-related health policy site, and much of the material on the forum web site is meant for the specialist. But the section aptly named “the basics” includes useful primers.

*Congressional Budget Office* [www.CBO.gov](http://www.CBO.gov). (or <http://www.cbo.gov/publications/collections/health.cfm>)

Current CBO director Peter Orszag has made health policy a priority and the CBO reports on health spending are both comprehensive and a lot easier for the layperson to understand than you might think.

*Association of Health Care Journalists* <http://www.healthjournalism.org/>.

Less than a decade old, this nonprofit organization has more than 1,000 members. Some resources are available online free; other reporting guides and materials (including some helpful hints about how to cover local hospitals) are available only to members. Members also have access to a listserve that links experienced health policy writers to newcomers to the beat and allows reporters to exchange ideas and resources.

*Health Affairs* <http://www.healthaffairs.org/>.

This is the premier journal on health policy. It is not necessarily the place for a health care novice, but it is useful to get onto the press email list and turn to it as you need more depth on a topic.

*Robert Wood Johnson Foundation* <http://www.rwjf.org/>.

This leading health foundation has lots of data on both health policy and public health. Chart packs and maps can be useful for reporters on a local health beat, or pinpointing national trends. Sometimes just roaming through lists of their scholars and grantees can lead to interesting and innovative sources with good stories to tell.