



Three ways Jimmy Kimmel struck a nerve on the ACA

By Joanna Weiss | May 2, 2017

On his ABC talk show last night, Jimmy Kimmel shared the story of his newborn son's heart condition, from the terrifying diagnosis to the successful surgery. His monologue ended with tears and a pointed political message: As Congress once again debates the Affordable Care Act, it should remember the people the law has helped.

"We were brought up to believe that we live in the greatest county in the world," Kimmel said, "but until a few years ago, millions and millions of us had no access to health insurance at all."

Kimmel's message is part of an ongoing conversation about the real-life effects of the ACA and the priorities of healthcare policymakers. Here is related analysis and commentary from athenaInsight:

The effects of expanded coverage

Kimmel spoke emotionally about how health insurance coverage helps families in crisis — ensuring that loved ones will receive the care they need, regardless of economic status.

"No parent should ever have to decide if they can afford to save their child's life," Kimmel said, with emotion. "It just shouldn't happen. Not here."



Data from the athenahealth network indicates that expanded coverage, in fact, does change the way people use healthcare on a regular basis.

A study conducted last year with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, focused on Medicaid expansion, a key and controversial ACA provision, adopted by only a portion of states. Researchers analyzed primary care visits from Medicaid patients in expansion and non-expansion states between 2012 and 2015. They found that new Medicaid patients were likely to return for follow-up visits — particularly if those patients suffered from multiple chronic conditions.

That suggests new Medicaid patients are developing ongoing relationships with providers, which bodes well for chronic disease control and overall health. athenahealth vice president of research Josh Gray said expansion has provided

“accessible, more dignified, and more effective healthcare to the poor.”

What we ought to expect from the ACA

On the eve of last fall’s presidential election, Paul Levy, former CEO of Boston’s Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, weighed in on complaints that the ACA hadn’t curbed healthcare costs.

Of course, the ACA was going to be expensive, Levy wrote; the priority was giving people access to healthcare, providing the kind of safety net that Kimmel spoke about in his monologue.

Kimmel pointed out how dramatically the law has changed the healthcare landscape for people born sick.

“You know, before 2014, if you were born with congenital heart disease like my son was, there was a good chance you’d never be able to get health insurance at all because you had a preexisting condition,” he said.

And Levy wrote that any changes to the law shouldn’t undo that expanded access.

“Let’s not throw the baby out with the bath water,” he wrote. “We must acknowledge that the underlying purpose of the ACA – to provide access to insurance and relieve Americans of the fear of losing their employer-based plans when they change or lose jobs – is essential.”

What access to good care means

As his monologue wrapped up, Kimmel pleaded for common ground and community spirit. People of every economic background, he said, deserve access to good care.

“If your baby is going to die and it doesn’t have to, it shouldn’t matter how much money you make. I think

that is something that whether you are a Republican or a Democrat or something else, we all agree on that, right?” he said, as the audience cheered.

When it comes to treating the poor, community health centers are often where the rubber hits the road. As part of athenaInsight’s “Listen Up, Washington” series, John Sawyer, M.D., chief medical officer of Hudson Headwaters Health Network, spelled out precisely whom these community health centers serve: “More than 22 million individuals, 71 percent of whom live below the poverty line, 28 percent of whom are uninsured, and 47 percent of whom are on Medicaid.”

About half of community health centers are located in rural areas, Sawyer went on. “They truly represent the safety net providers.” In his essay, Sawyer urged lawmakers to maintain funding for health centers through Section 330 of the Public Health Service Act.

It’s likely that Kimmel would agree.

Joanna Weiss is executive editor of athenaInsight.

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