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The Affordable Care Act Turns 10

BY ALAN R. WEIL

On March 23, 2010, President Barack Obama signed the Affordable Care Act (ACA) into law. In addition to the largest expansion of insurance coverage since the creation of Medicare and Medicaid, it ushered in changes in how health care is paid for and how health care services are delivered. The March issue of *Health Affairs* provides a comprehensive review of what the law has accomplished and what remains to be done as the ACA turns 10.

THE BIG QUESTIONS

Three papers in this issue examine the three big questions people ask about the law: Did it improve access to care, did it improve people's health, and did it bend the cost curve? Sherry Glied and coauthors answer the first question with a clear "yes." Through expanded public and private insurance coverage as well as market rules that eliminated coverage exclusions and high premiums for people with health conditions, the law substantially reduced financial barriers to receiving health care services.

Aparna Soni and colleagues review well-constructed studies that looked at the health effects of the law. They find "promising improvements" in certain health outcomes, while acknowledging the need for ongoing research.

Health spending growth has been low by historical standards since the ACA's enactment, but is that due to the law? Melinda Beeuwkes Buntin and John Graves note that specific provisions can be shown to have affected the cost trajectory, even as the overall effect on

health spending is "nearly impossible" to discern.

Lois Lee and coauthors conduct a literature review that shows significant improvements in women's health insurance coverage, access to care, and use of health care services in the wake of the ACA. Thomas Buchmueller and Helen Levy show that the ACA narrowed but did not eliminate racial/ethnic disparities in coverage and access.

IMPROVING MARKETS AND CARE DELIVERY

Matthew Fiedler reviews research on the effect of the individual mandate to purchase health insurance coverage and concludes that it had a meaningful but modest effect. Sabrina Corlette and colleagues, noting that "a key element of the strategy of the [ACA] to expand coverage was to fix flaws in the individual market that made it difficult for people with health problems to obtain adequate, affordable insurance," describe the significant transformation of this market.

Michael Chernew and colleagues view the ACA's payment reforms as "modestly successful" in achieving savings while sustaining or improving the quality of care. Deborah Peikes and coauthors describe myriad ACA initiatives designed to support primary care and the lessons learned from those efforts.

Rena Conti and colleagues recount how the ACA expanded access to prescription drugs but left certain issues unaddressed that are still being debated in the policy arena. Brendan Saloner and Johanna Catherine Maclean present new evidence on how the Medicaid expansion led to rapid increases in specialty substance use disorder treatment.

POLITICS, LAW, AND FEDERALISM

Calling the politics of the ACA "more tenuous than triumphal," Jonathan Oberlander dubs the political and partisan battles in the years since the ACA's enactment the "Ten Years' War." The war has been and continues to be waged in the courts, as described by Timothy Stoltzfus Jost and Katie Keith. It is also reflected in polarized public opinion, illustrated by Mollyann Brodie and colleagues through more than 100 nationally representative public opinion polls. Michael Sparer explains the complex federalism that characterizes both the Medicaid expansion and the law's Marketplaces. Philip Rocco and coauthors look specifically at how state-level politics affected adoption of the Medicaid expansion.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The issue includes four perspectives on what should come next written by Chiquita Brooks-LaSure, Elizabeth Fowler, and Gayle Mauser; Sara Rosenbaum and Gail Wilensky; Avik Roy; and Benjamin Sommers. Julie Rovner discusses the challenges the media faced in describing and covering developments, given the ACA's substantive and political complexity. Primary care physician Rachel Stern writes in *Narrative Matters* how the ACA affected her care as a medical student and now affects her patients.

I sat down with Matt Eyles, Nancy Nielsen, Rick Pollack, and Billy Tauzin, representing health plans, physicians, hospitals, and the pharmaceutical industry, respectively, to reflect on the ACA's successes, its shortcomings, and the politics leading to its passage. We bring this month's content together in a DataGraphic with a timeline of major events in the ACA's ten-year history combined with key findings from the research.

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