

## **IMMIGRANT MED CARE CRITICIZED**

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### **Body**

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Zhuo Hua Wu suffers from kidney stones, but all he has to relieve his pain is a mixture of tea remedies and a \$1.88 medication from Hong Kong.

Wu, 40, a kitchen worker at a Chinese restaurant, is a legal U.S. resident, and need not fear reaching out for mainstream medical care. But he doesn't, because he's ineligible for Medicaid and can't afford mainstream care.

In 1996, Congress changed the welfare laws and cut benefits to thousands of foreign-born U.S. residents like Wu.

"This [\$1.88 medicine] helps the pain a little bit, but what I really need is to have health insurance," he said. "I'm afraid that my condition is getting worse and worse."

When his pain becomes unbearable, Wu likely will end up in a hospital emergency room, where, according to a new study, more and more legal immigrants are ending up for their primary health care.

The study, released yesterday by the New York Immigrant Coalition, is titled "Welfare Reform and Health Care: The Wrong Prescription for Immigrants."

"Lawmakers are not paying attention to those who live here," said coalition executive director Margaret McHugh. "This was a stupid law."

Joined at a Manhattan news conference by Rep. Jose Serrano (D-Bronx), City Controller Alan Hevesi and representatives of immigrant advocacy groups, McHugh called for the restoration of Medicaid to legal immigrants.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, approved as a welfare reform in 1996, barred needy legal immigrants who have not been in this country for five years from receiving benefits such as food stamps and Medicaid.

The coalition's study, which conducted 14 focus groups in various immigrant communities in the city, concluded that immigrants get tuberculosis at double the rate of native-born citizens, and that infant mortality rates are higher in immigrant families.

In addition, it reveals, some 45% of permanent legal U.S. residents are uninsured. That figure is likely to increase by at least half by the year 2005, the report said.

Providing emergency health care for the uninsured - including legal immigrants unable to pay their hospital bills - is squeezing the resources of hospitals that serve low-income New Yorkers, officials said.

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