

# **Alaska Primary Health Care: *OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES***

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**Co-chairs:**

**Thomas Nighswander, M.D. and Marvin Swink**

**Editor: Duane Heyman**

**Hartig Fellow: Dan Kiley, D.D.S.**

**UNDERWRITERS:**

**Providence Health System  
Alaska Regional Hospital  
Dorsey & Whitney LLP  
ConocoPhillips Alaska  
Alaska Railroad Corporation  
AARP  
Qualis Health**

**[www.commonwealthnorth.org](http://www.commonwealthnorth.org)**

**Commonwealth North  
810 N Street, Suite 202  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501  
Phone: (907) 276-1414  
Fax: (907) 276-6350**

**E-mail: [exec@commonwealthnorth.org](mailto:exec@commonwealthnorth.org)**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Why Alaska health care issues must be addressed and solved**

Health care is not a goal or end in itself. The ultimate goal of health care and of this study is health and wellness for Alaskans. Alaskans must identify and improve the aspects of health care that are under our control. Many health care issues are national, that Alaskans cannot affect. Therefore, it is even more important to address and solve issues we can do something about. Furthermore, the demographics of an aging population will put foreseeable pressure on all fronts.

### **ACCESS**

- Approximately 110,000 Alaskans have no health insurance coverage.
- Many others have minimal or inadequate coverage.
- Thousands are turning to hospital emergency rooms as a source of primary health care, often without ability to pay.
- Adequate health care in remote areas is a significant logistical, financial and educational challenge.

### **QUALITY**

- Based on the 2004 National Healthcare Quality Report, Alaska has low rankings in several key measures of cancer, heart disease, maternal and child health, respiratory diseases, and nursing and home health care.
- Many Alaskans are in high-risk health categories, many are not receiving adequate care.

### **COST**

- Alaska health care costs are approximately 40% higher than Seattle (per Premera, corroborated by Providence and Alaska Regional)
- Medicaid costs to the State of Alaska are rising dramatically, to over \$1 billion in 2005. It is placing a strain on the state budget.
- Health care insurance premiums are also rising dramatically, creating a significant burden on employers and employees.
- Alaska hospitals are losing tens of millions of dollars from uncollectable accounts arising from excessive emergency room use and they are unable to reduce the amount of emergency room care provided due to Federal law.

### **What can we do?**

There are four major interrelated factors driving primary healthcare in Alaska today:

1. Health and wellness of the population
2. Availability of care and insurance
3. Affordability of care and insurance
4. Financial health of the stakeholders, such as employers, providers and individuals

These drivers are currently interacting in a “cost spiral” that is creating a very serious situation nationally and in Alaska. The rate of increase in the cost of health care is unsustainable—if unchecked health care increases will price employers out of the market. Already industries such as automobiles are threatened. We need to avoid similar impacts in Alaska.

We believe that with focus and coordination Alaskans can impact this “cost spiral” positively through specific actions in the four areas mentioned above:

1. Lifestyle and prevention: Raise public awareness and increase personal responsibility for wellness
2. Access: Make services and insurance more widely available
3. Quality: Continue improving quality of care that is delivered
4. Costs: Reduce costs of service delivery and insurance to make them more affordable

There are many health care initiatives already underway in these areas by various governmental and non-governmental entities. Some have proven to be effective and cost-efficient. Others show significant promise. Health care reform is complex and controversial, with multiple players and competing interests. Inconsistent tracking and trending create significant factual disputes about healthcare systems. Any major reform has potential to create both winners and losers.

Given this environment, the Study Group came to three overarching conclusions:

1. The Study Group process itself has been enlightening, educational and productive.
2. Every aspect of health care is complex. Understanding the system and improving it is beyond the capacity of any one element within the system.
3. The Study Group recommends that an ongoing body be established to continue and deepen this Group’s work.

The time to act is now. Involvement of Alaskans in the health care debate is vital. Reform of some sort is inevitable, and Alaskans should control it as much as possible to our own benefit. Since there is no single forum today where the disparate players can come together to agree on facts, share solutions and craft a win-win for our unique Alaskan conditions, this Study Group recommend formation of—

### **The Alaska Health Care Roundtable (“Roundtable”)**

The goals of the Roundtable are to continue communication and foster action among parties that have a long-term vested interest in health care reform. It must set a standard of credibility and create timely actionable ideas that can gather bipartisan support, get quick approval and become part of a long-term fiscal plan for Alaska. It would be a sounding board and facilitator for ideas and recommendations, with a focus on lifestyle and prevention, access, quality and cost.

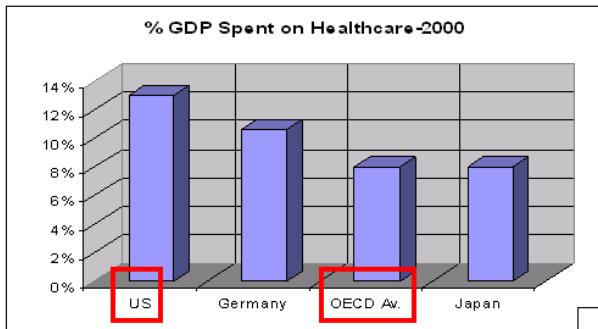
The core membership in the Roundtable would be self-selecting, comprised of members with a long-term compelling interest in improving the Alaska health care system. Examples of core members would be major employers at risk, health care providers and local foundations. A wide variety of other potential members, resources and ad hoc participants could be included as needed. Funding would be by voluntary contributions by the participants and the community.

# INTRODUCTION

## The big picture: National background issues and the state of health in the U.S.

While the focus of this study is factors controllable in Alaska, it is important to understand the national context in which we operate. The United States spends more on health care than any other country, measured either as a percentage of gross domestic product, or in terms of money spent per person. The OECD, or Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, is a group of industrialized nations that are an appropriate benchmark for U.S. expenditures and performance.

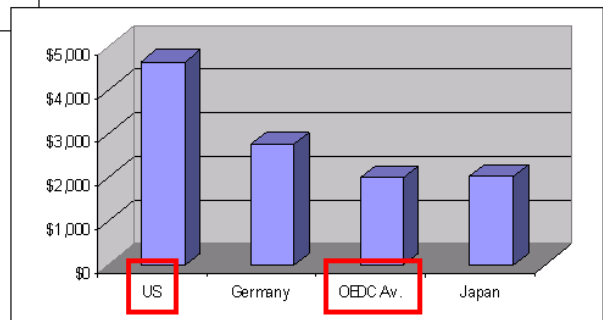
## The National Situation - Spending



Source: Commonwealth Fund

OECD—Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

Per capita health care expenditures by country



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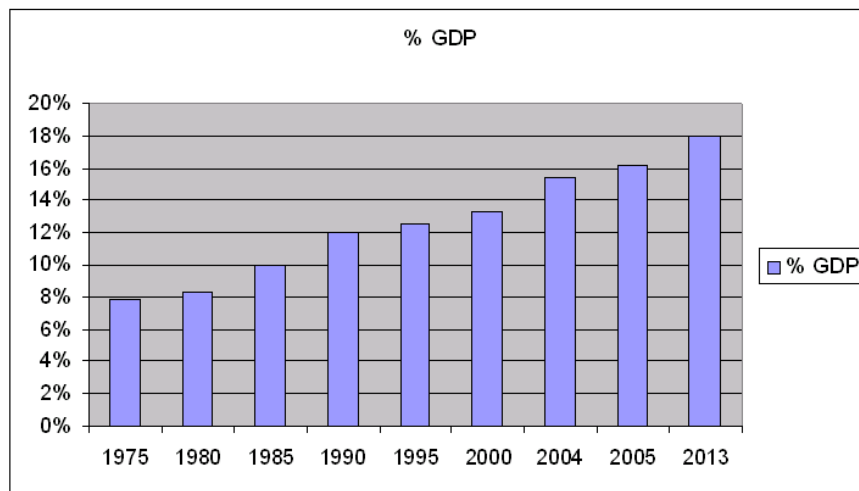
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Health care spending has risen dramatically in recent years, increasing from about 8 % of the gross domestic product in 1975 to over 16% today. The Commonwealth Fund, a private nonpartisan foundation that supports independent research on health and social issues, projects that by 2013 the U.S. will be spending 18% of GDP on health care.

Many factors contribute to these increases. Often cited are huge costs caring for the last three months of life, advertising driven consumerism, high cost of technology, defensive medicine practiced to avoid malpractice suits, malpractice insurance, a fractionated payment system and massive cost shifting to those able to pay caused by inadequate or no health insurance for many Americans (and Alaskans). The crushing cost of health care threatens whole industries and affects our worldwide ability to compete economically.

## The National Spending Situation: Trend in Healthcare Costs as a % of GDP

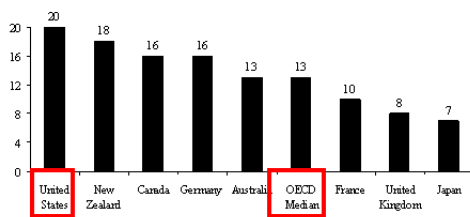


Source: Commonwealth Fund

The **Commonwealth Fund** is a foundation specializing in health care issues.

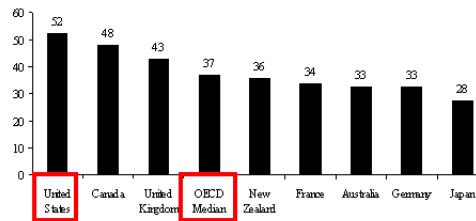
In terms of outcomes, the United States has obtained poor results from the massive amounts invested. By many measures, the U.S. trails other industrialized nations, as represented by Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development averages. We also have a higher percentage of uninsured than most advanced countries, which tend to have centralized health care systems.

## The National Situation: Outcomes



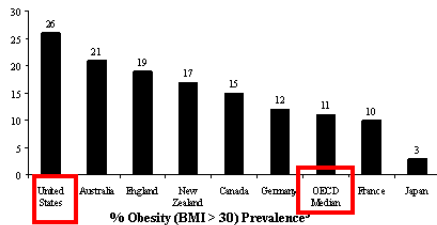
Age-Standardized Mortality Rates for Diabetes Mellitus per 100,000 Population in 1999<sup>34</sup>

### DIABETES



Age-Standardized Mortality Rates for Lung Cancer per 100,000 Population in 1999

### LUNG CANCER



### OBESITY

And, the U.S. ranks only

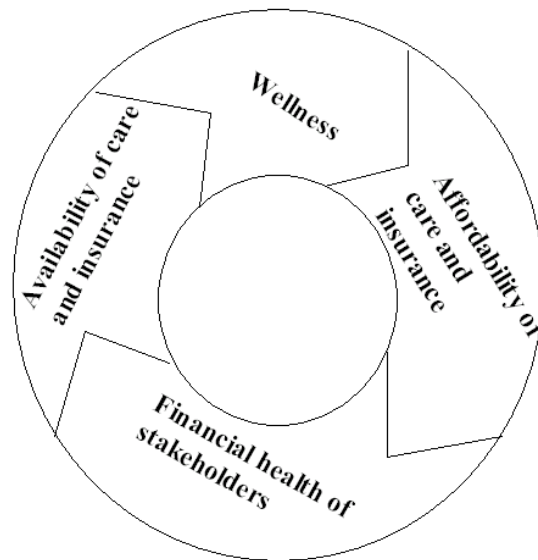
- #28 overall in infant mortality
- #24 in life expectancy

Sources: OECD Health Data 2002,  
March of Dimes Data Center 2002  
World Health Organization 2000

A conceptual framework of four primary healthcare factors can help us understand how all the different factors are interrelated.



## Four Primary Healthcare Factors and how they are interrelated



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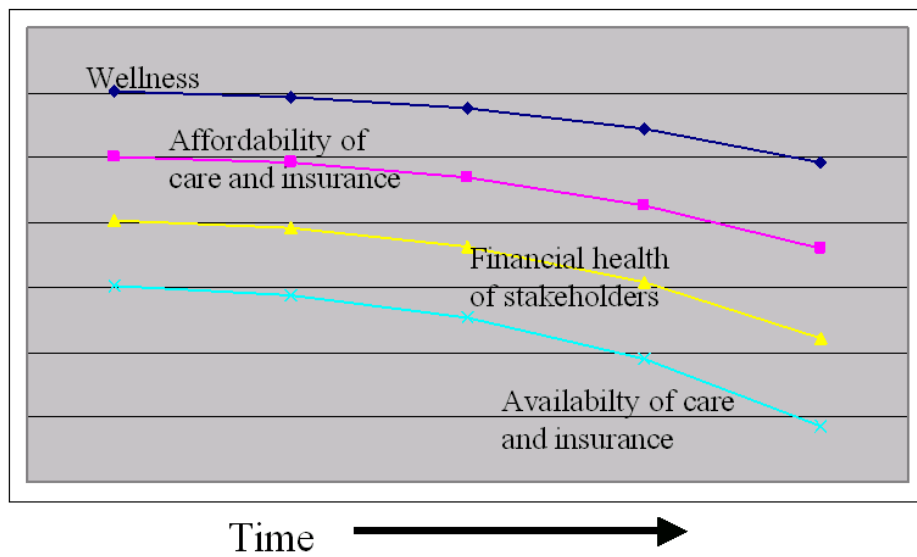
- Wellness of the population
- Affordability, coordination and quality of care and insurance
- Availability of care and insurance
- Financial health of stakeholders including:
  - Health care providers (physicians, clinics, hospitals)
  - Companies, institutions and government

These factors are all part of a complete cycle. Each factor affects the other. Therefore they are portrayed in a circle.



As time goes on, each of these factors influences the others, with the ultimate result of either undermining or improving the health and wellness of our people.

## The conceptual crux of the problem



A significant problem is a de facto dynamic in our current U.S. health care policy.

The motto of a popular Alaska establishment embodies this unintended and unwanted de facto policy, to wit—



“We cheat the other guy and pass the savings on to you!”

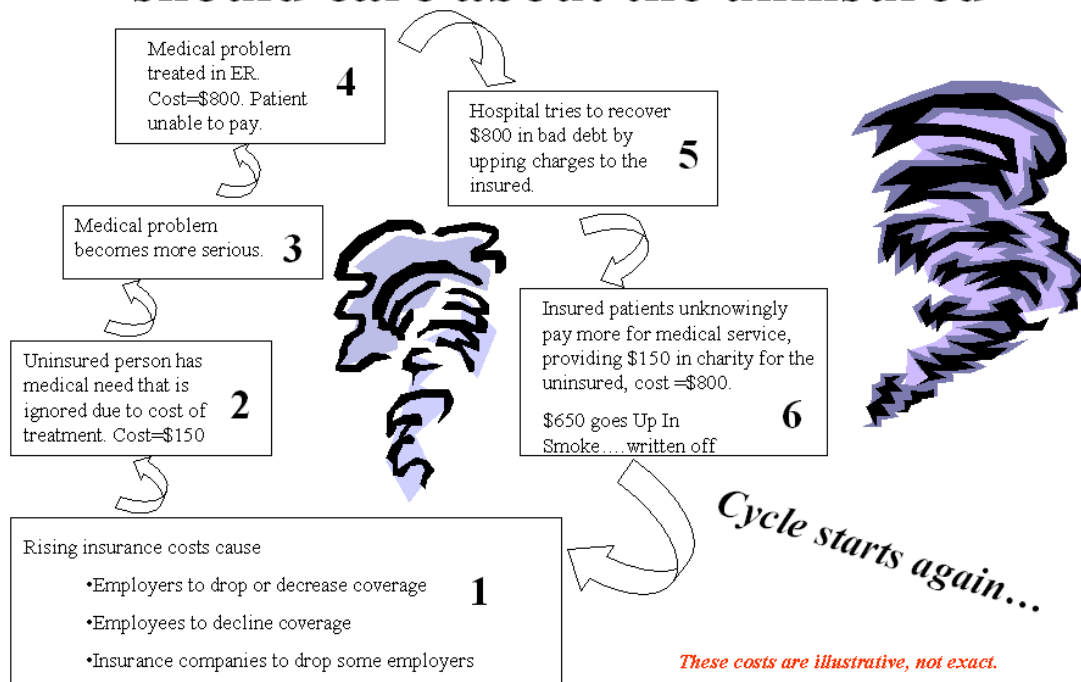
This phenomenon has impacts both nationally and in Alaska, and Alaskans are not always the beneficiary, creating serious cost shifting and economic dislocations.

## A SIGNIFICANT ISSUE FOR HEALTH CARE IN ALASKA

The focus of this study is what can be done in Alaska. It does not address national issues such as a single payer system, rationing of health care or national structural issues. However, the following conceptual illustration is both a national and Alaska problem.

It shows how the high cost of health care causes people to postpone needed care, which increases ultimate costs of treatment, frequently and reluctantly performed by practitioners at unneeded and inappropriate levels. Often the emergency room of a hospital becomes a highly expensive primary care facility. If treated earlier, medical conditions could have better outcomes at a lower cost.

### Why even a non-compassionate insured should care about the uninsured



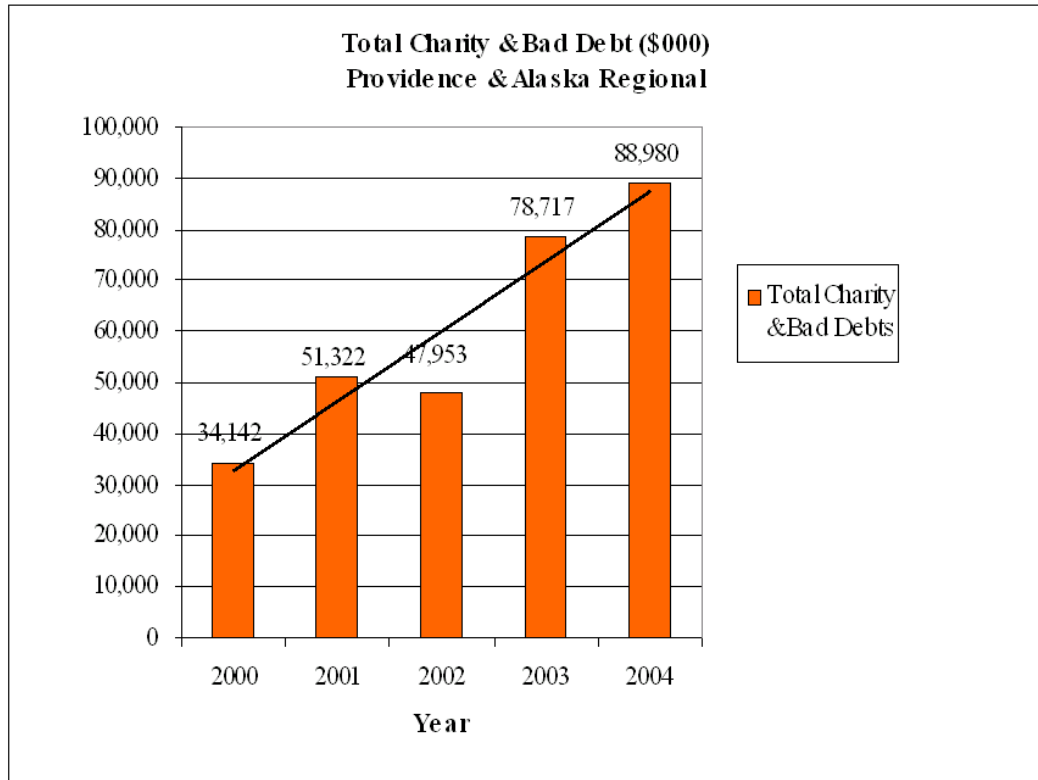
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A federal law, the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act (“EMTALA”) requires that hospital emergency rooms treat and not turn away any patients who show up, regardless of ability to pay.

**Emergency rooms** are becoming primary care treatment centers for those without access to, or awareness of, alternatives. Current waits can be up to two hours, especially during high traffic times like early evenings or weekends. This creates inefficient use of specially trained staff and is enormously expensive. Many ER patients have no insurance coverage or other means to pay their bill. The financial burden then falls on the hospital to write off uncollectible accounts.

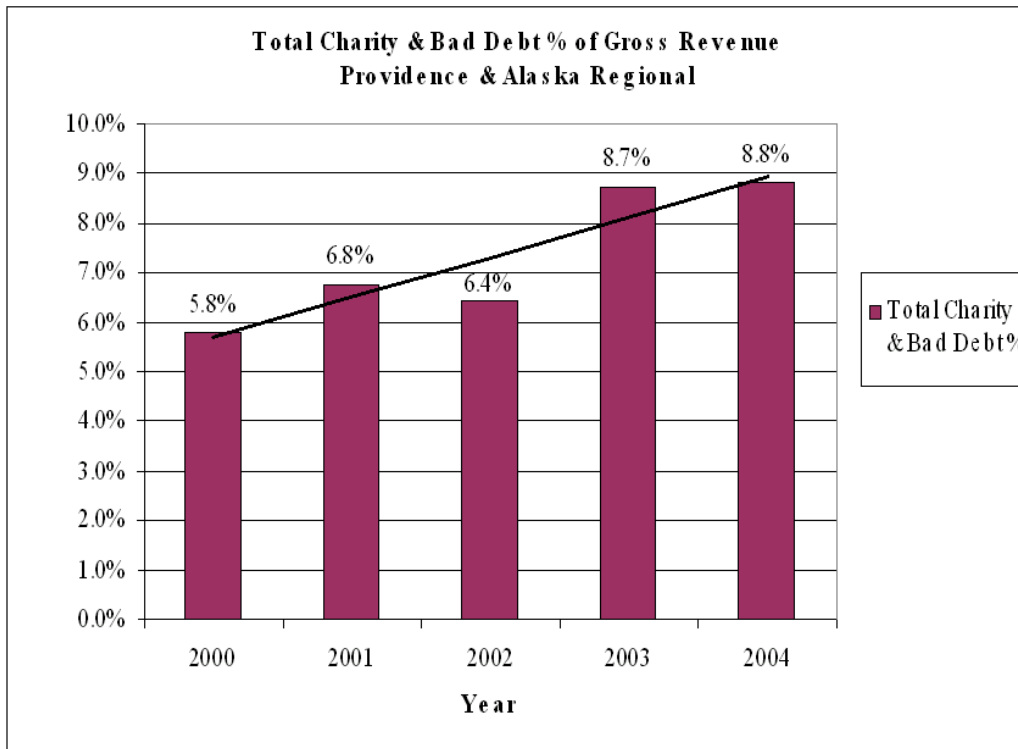


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Note: the numbers above are in thousands of dollars. E.g. 88,980 = \$88,980,000



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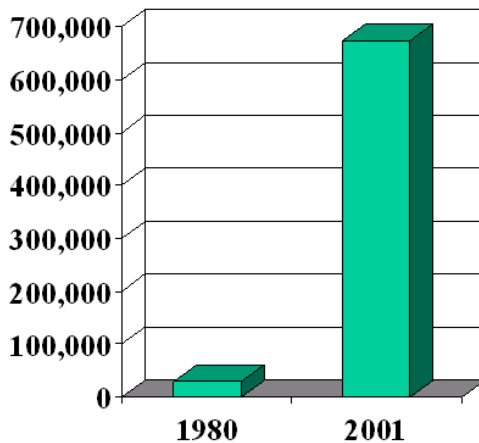


The financial impact on hospitals is even more acute than the slide above suggests. While the percentage of charity and bad debt compared to gross revenue has increased dramatically in recent years, the bottom line impact is significantly greater because actual hospital cash collections are much less than the gross revenue billings used in the chart above.

Hospitals are not the only ones affected. Individuals unable to pay medical expenses are filing for bankruptcy at staggering rates. Although Alaska data are not available, national data are noted below.



## Personal Bankruptcies due to Health Care Costs-U.S.



- Between 1980 and 2001 medically driven bankruptcies increased 23 times
- 60% skipped doctors visits
- 47% skipped prescription medicines

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Source: American Medical Association 2/05 and a Harvard Law School/Medical School 2/05 studies.

70% of these debtors had some form of health insurance at the start.

Main factors cited for declaring bankruptcy were:

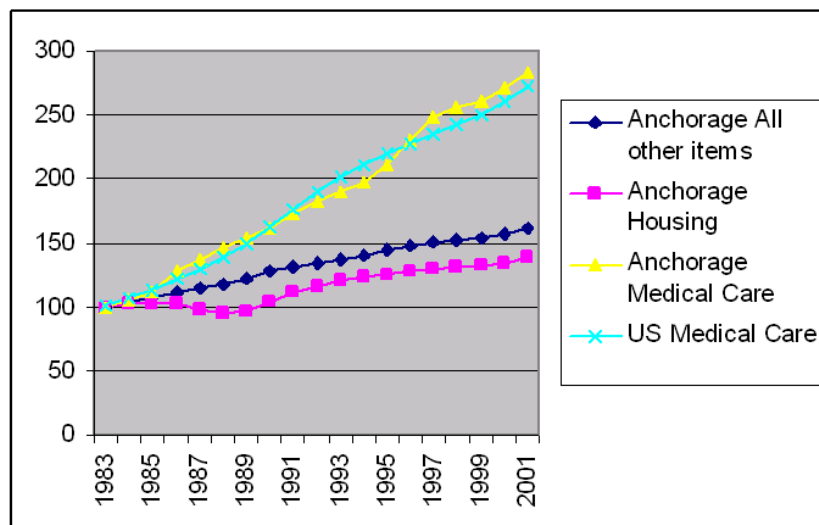
Hospital costs	42%
Prescription drug costs	21%
Doctor bills	20%

## Cost: What do Alaskans pay? Why?

The impact of **bad debt** on the health care system has been clearly illustrated in the preceding charts.

# Increasing Cost of Medical Care in Alaska

Anchorage CPI-U for selected components 1982-2001



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Source: Alaska Economic Trends June 2004

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Premera, Alaska's largest health care insurer, reports that their **Alaska costs are about 40% higher than Seattle**. General observations by resource people have referenced a 40% differential overall, more in some specialties, less in others. Local hospitals have corroborated this differential. Other information points to even larger discrepancies on reimbursement rates for physicians. The Alaska Division of Medical Assistance Health Care Cost Analysis Report placed Alaska in the top five states in terms of the cost of medical and surgical procedures.

**Small practices** and increasing personnel costs contribute to the high cost of medicine in Alaska. Also there is general, but not substantiated, belief that the **Alaska population is too small to support HMOs**. Any discussion of managed care has been resisted by medical providers.

**Dependence on "Fair Share" and other sources** of federal dollars place about \$800 million potentially at risk, an important share of current health care funding to Alaska. Alaska also faces **competition from other states** for willing providers. Furthermore, **reimbursement**

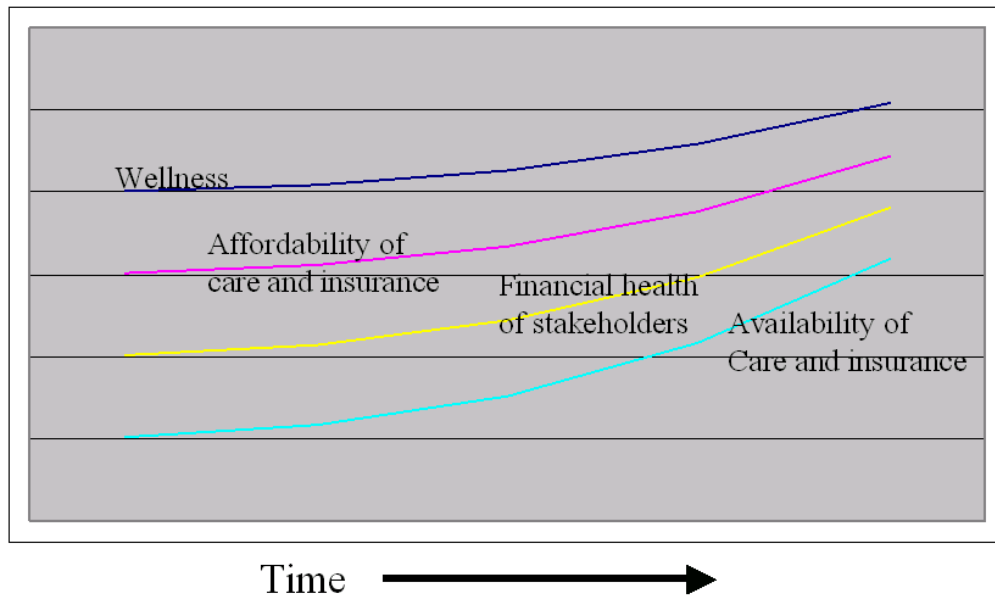
**formulas are going down.** The state is now paying over one billion dollars annually to pay Medicaid expenses.

**Cost of health insurance**—there is no public oversight of health care insurance rates by the Division of Insurance as there is in some other states. They are a result of negotiations between insurance companies and large groups.

The **Certificate of Need** situation needs to be objectively analyzed and considered as a component in a comprehensive statewide health care plan. Critics of the Certificate of Need claim the process stifles competition and innovation. Supporters claim it prevents unnecessary duplication of facilities and allows more rational allocation of assets.

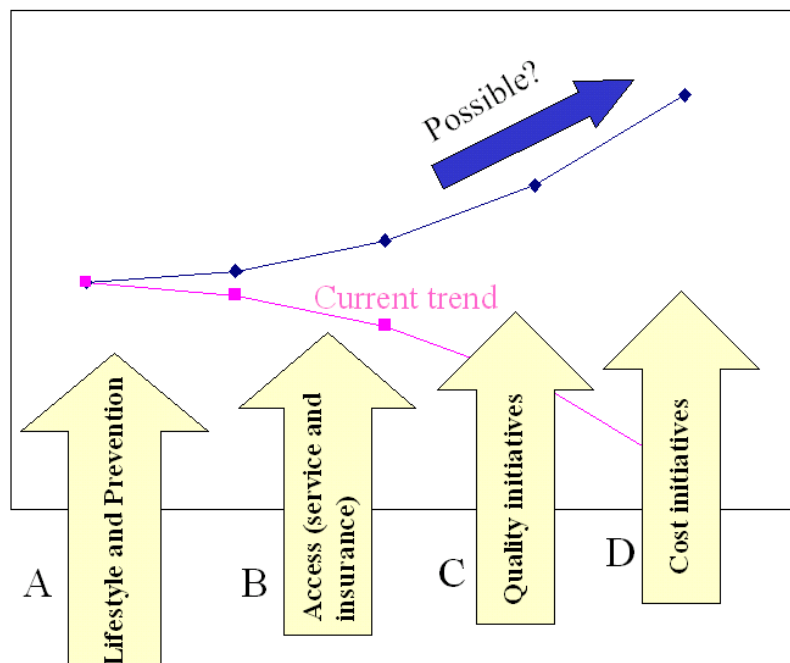
**The impact of tort issues on health care.** The cost of malpractice insurance and defensive medicine is hard to quantify, but is deemed to be substantial. OB/GYN liability insurance is \$60-65k/year. SB 67 puts a 250k cap on non-economic suffering. The California experience with a similar cap since 1975 has been positive. Alaska has only two traditional liability carriers. However, compared to U.S. averages, malpractice insurance costs in Alaska are middle of the pack.

## Is a trend reversal possible in Alaska?





Perhaps, with coordinated and focused effort



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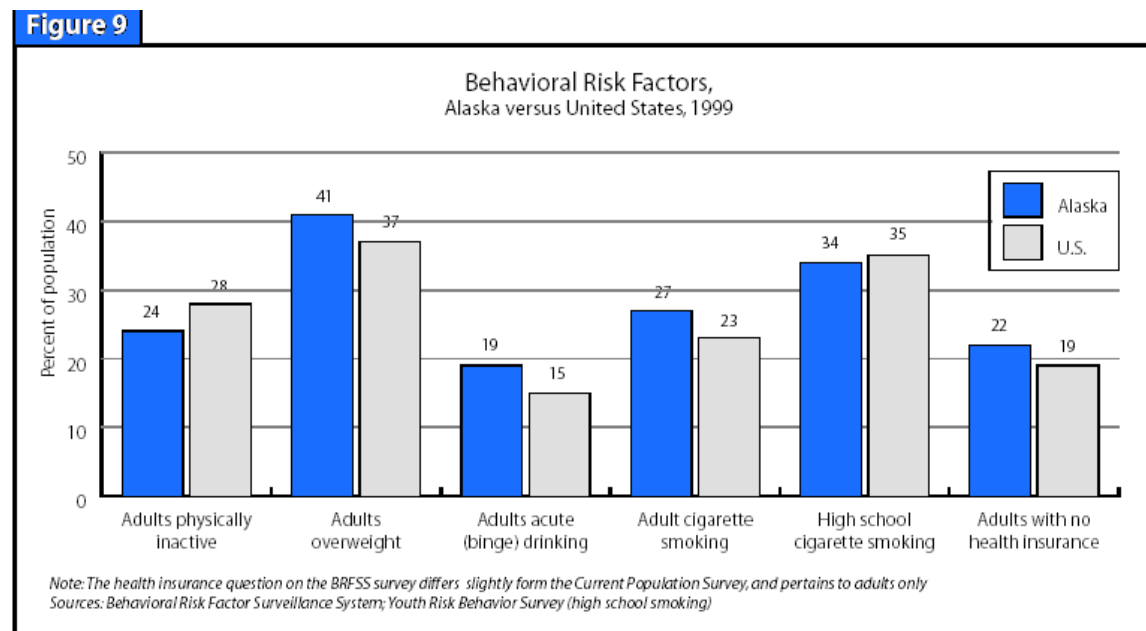
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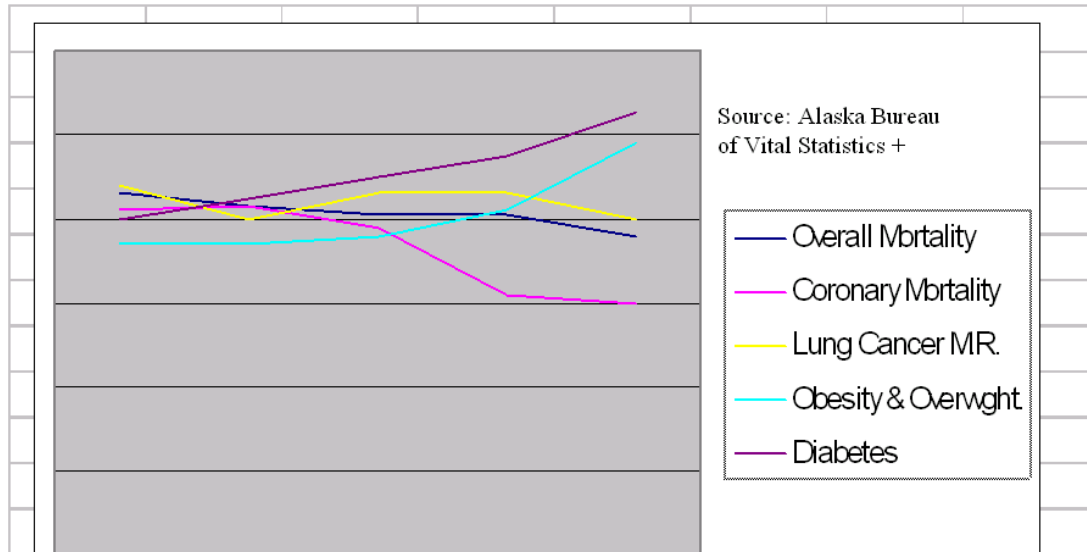
Quality of Alaska’s health: Based on the 2004 National Health Care Quality Report of 100 measures of health care quality, Alaska is about average for the U.S. However, as the charts on page 7 indicate, the U.S. trails many other industrialized nations.

## Unfortunately, Alaska mirrors poor National behavioral risk factors





# Alaska Trends in major disease



**Trends only—not incidence rates**

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(Vertical axis is rates of disease, horizontal axis is time)

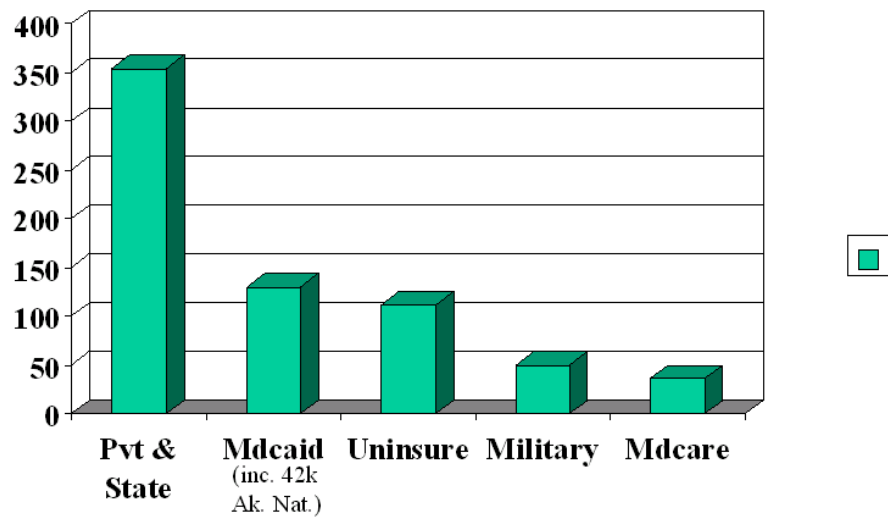
While progress has been made in heart and lung disease, obesity and diabetes have negative trends.

## How is Alaska's health care being paid? What about those without coverage?

Currently about 110,000 Alaskans do not have health care insurance. Approximately 82% of Alaskans have some type of insurance coverage, as illustrated by the chart below. The column for private and state coverage includes state employees. Medicaid covers over 40,000 Alaska Natives, the remainder of which are covered under federal programs. Military and Medicare coverage rounds out the picture. However, an unquantified, but suspected to be substantial, number of people have inadequate insurance coverage.



### Alaska's Insurance Coverage

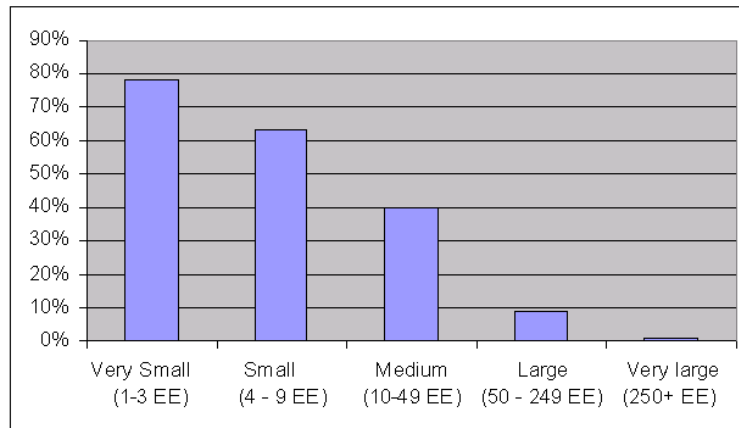


Source: Navigant Consulting, Ak. Journal of Commerce



The majority of Alaskans without insurance work for smaller businesses.

## Alaskan firms NOT offering health insurance



And only 2.2% of Alaskans were employed in firms with over 50 employees...

Source: Alaska Dept. of Labor and Workforce Development, 2002

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### Safety net providers

There are 34 federally sponsored Community Health Centers (CHCs) in Alaska. They see all patients and charge a sliding fee schedule based upon income. Although there are the Neighborhood Health Center in Anchorage and the Interior Community Health Center in Fairbanks (both federally sponsored CHCs), a large number of uninsured patients receive their care in the city's emergency rooms.

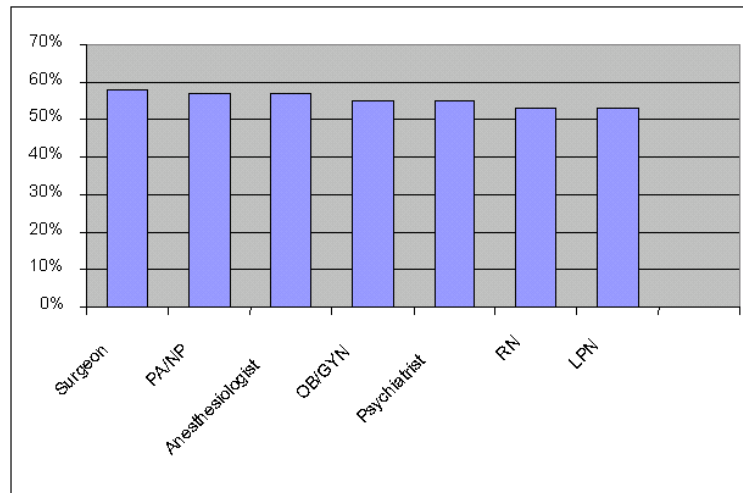
Under federal law, patients who visit the emergency rooms must be seen regardless of their ability to pay. This results in the uncompensated care that was referenced previously.

Although not safety net providers, the Alaska Native Health system provides care to an estimated 125,000 Alaska Natives through an extensive network of community health aid clinics, regional hospitals and a major referral center.

# Healthcare Provider Shortages are Projected for Alaska



PERCENT OF PROVIDERS CURRENTLY MORE THAN 45 YEARS OF AGE:



Sources: AK Department of Labor

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**Shortage of doctors:** ½ doctors in Alaska are over 50. Fewer doctors are practicing than are licensed. Compared to the rest of the U.S., Alaska has 17-30% fewer doctors per capita, partly because we have a relatively younger population. However Alaskans are aging, and the need will increase. Today Alaska needs 472 more doctors than it has. The shortage will increase in the future. Statewide Alaska has a 25-30% shortage of physicians. Physicians are practicing fewer hours and retiring younger than in past decades. As a result it may require more than one new physician to replace a retiring one. 70% of doctors in the lower 48 practice near where they did their residency. The rate of return on a medical education is diminishing compared to other professions. Medical students average \$100,000 of debt; specialties can be \$250,000 with an average of 8 years post-graduate education. Similarly, graduating dentists average nearly \$200,000 in debt. In contrast, graduating attorneys and MBA's begin earning money faster and with less debt.

**Nurse Practitioners and Physician Assistants** provide care to Alaskans in a wide variety of settings, including rural and urban primary care clinics, urban specialty practices, and remote critical access hospitals that were historically difficult to staff with other providers. There are over 200 physician assistants and 420 nurse practitioners working in Alaska. This gives Alaska one of the highest ratios of nurse practitioners per capita in the nation.

As in 25 other states nurse practitioners are licensed to practice autonomously. A recent Columbia University study (JAMA, 2000) and another from Yale University (1992), compared physician and nurse practitioner practice. They found that patients expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the care they received, that accuracy of diagnosis and health outcomes were equivalent, and that Nurse Practitioners provide quality, cost-effective care to their patients.

**The role and extent of coverage of complementary and alternative medicine**

(chiropractic, acupuncture, etc.) in Alaska is undefined, but substantial. As of May 25, 2005, the Alaska Division of Occupational licensing listed the following numbers of active licenses for the following types of doctors:

Allopathic doctors (M.D.)	2,377
Chiropractic doctors (D.C.)	227
Osteopathic doctors (D.O.)	183
Podiatrist (D.P.M.)	20

## **SPECIFIC ALASKAN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

This Study Group has identified a continuum of challenges, many of which are interrelated to each other. While they may all be part of a whole, the Study Group identified discrete categories to more readily focus on how each recommendation may be best implemented. A chart below summarizes the recommendations and identifies which parties are affected by, or responsible for, each recommendation.

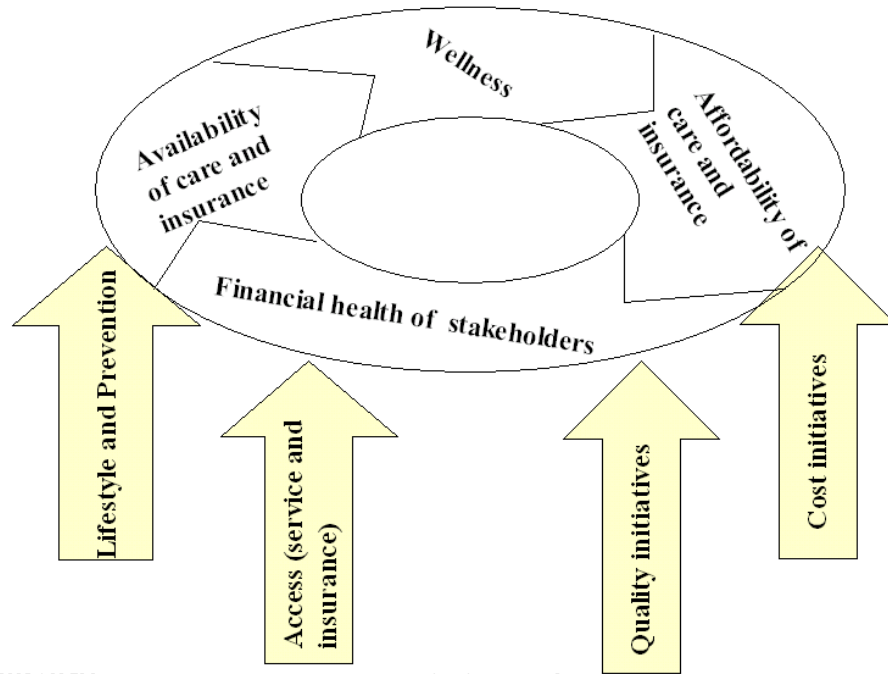
However, in the process of assessing health care in Alaska, and looking for improvements, the Study Group developed consensus on three overarching conclusions:

- 1. The Study Group process itself, which includes representatives of all key components of the health care system in Alaska, has been enlightening, educational and productive. For the first time in recent years, key players have been able to share experiences and ideas in a supportive and cooperative environment.**
- 2. Every aspect of health care is complex. Education, technology, funding, social and demographic factors, economics, federal and state laws and regulations all have many interrelated facets. Understanding the health care system, and improving it, are beyond the capacity of any one element within the system.**
- 3. Therefore, a fundamental recommendation of the Study Group is that an ongoing body be established to achieve multiple goals:**
  - a. Continue the communication process started by this Study Group among the key elements in the Alaska health care system and the broader Alaska community.**
  - b. Create a body that will have a long-term vested interest in understanding and improving the system. Some solutions are immediate, others will take generations. But without consistent advocacy, the system is unlikely to make needed fundamental changes.**
  - c. Through the quality of its participants, and the comprehensiveness and depth of its vision, the body will set a standard of credibility that will sustain its ongoing operations and facilitate implementation of its recommendations.**

**In that spirit, this Study Group offers the “Yarmon Plan” as a starting point for structuring such a body.**



# The Roundtable Proposal (The Yarmon Plan)



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## The Alaska Health Care Roundtable

**Goals:** a, b, c on the previous page. Create a timely, actionable package that will gather bipartisan political support, get quick approval, and become a significant part of a long-term fiscal plan for Alaska.

**Focus:** Access, quality and cost. Function as both a sounding board and facilitator for ideas and recommendations.

**Structure:** Create the “Alaska Health Care Roundtable”

**Membership in the Roundtable:** Self-selecting. Must have a core of members who have a long-term compelling interest in improving access, quality and cost of health care in Alaska. Examples of potential members would be:

- a. Major employers
- b. Providers
- c. Foundations
- d. Other participants as invited by the Roundtable

**Funding:** Voluntary contributions by the participants.

**Strategic relationships:** Form a research relationship with the **University of Alaska/Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER)**. The Roundtable itself could focus on strategic policy and political analysis. UA would provide in-depth research as needed on a contract basis.

**Tactics:** Secure the support of major employers and secure their interest in funding such a Roundtable. There is no point in CWN issuing a major recommendation that will fall flat on its face. Get seven or more CEOs of major employers to make a financial commitment to the project and be present at its unveiling.

Create a package of recommendations that will be dynamic, compelling and politically impossible not to accept. Create a “win-win” atmosphere so all participants can claim victory.

Local or regional Roundtables can address “nuts and bolts” issues of cooperation, implementation, sharing and efficiency.

**Potential resources, ad hoc participants or additional members:** Business leaders of large businesses, business leaders of small businesses, Alaska Natives, labor, non-profit (Foraker Group), education, military, insurance industry, state government (legislature, administration), health care providers, Medicare, Medicaid

**Summary table of recommendations with affected and responsible parties**

The following chart summarizes various recommendations that were suggested in the course of our study. They are a starting point of menu items for the Roundtable to analyze and prioritize.

**A = Parties affected by or benefiting from the listed Recommendation**

**R = Parties responsible for implementing the listed recommendation**

Recommendation	Individuals	Legislature	Governor	Local Governments	Private Sector	Health Care Professionals & Institutions	Universities (or schools)	Insurance Companies
<b>Lifestyle &amp; Prevention</b>								
1. Walkable community	AR			AR	AR	AR	AR	AR
2. Public Health role	A	R	R	AR	A	A	AR	A
3. School phys ed	A	R	R	AR	A	AR	R	A
4. Schools nix bad foods	AR	R	R	AR	A	AR	AR	A
5. Incentivize behaviors	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	A	AR	AR
7. Rural dentistry	A	A	A	AR	A	AR	AR	AR
8. Drug/psych facilities	A	AR	AR	AR	A	AR	A	AR
9. U.S. preventive health recommendations	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR
10. Circumpolar health studies	A	AR	AR	AR	A	A	A	A

<b>Access</b>	<b>Indiv.</b>	<b>Legis.</b>	<b>Gov.</b>	<b>Loc Gv</b>	<b>Private</b>	<b>HC</b>	<b>Univ/Sc</b>	<b>Ins. Cos</b>
1a. Expand WWAMI	A	R	R	A	A	AR	AR	AR
1b. Market AK To MDs	A	R	R	AR	AR	AR	A	AR
2. Cut liability ins. Cost factors	A	R	R	A	A	AR		AR
3. Cover uninsured	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR
4. Pool small cos.	A	R	R	AR	AR	A		AR
5. Promote lower cost centers	A	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	A	A
6. Same day non ER alternatives	A	R	R	AR	A	AR	A	AR
7. Examine other state models e.g. UT, ME	A	R	R	A		R	R	AR
8. More GME \$ for family practice	A	R	R	A	A	AR	AR	A
9. Improve MD reimbursements	A	R	R	A	A	AR		AR
10. Medicare licensing requirement	A	R	R	A	A	A	A	A
11. Public insurance hearings	A	R	R	A	A	A	A	AR
<b>Quality</b>								
1. Evidence based prevention, Intervention	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR
2. Use benchmarks	A	R	R	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR
3. Measure, disclose quality info	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR
<b>Costs</b>								
1. Prevention education, intervention	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR
2. Electronic medical records	A	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR
3. Drug formularies	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	A	AR
4. Health care <> State fiscal plan	A	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR
5. Disclose fees clearly	A	R	R	A	A	AR	A	AR
6. Community duplication dialogue	A			AR	AR	AR		AR
7. Joint purchasing	A			AR	AR	AR		A
8. Allocation & rationing	A	AR	AR	AR	A	AR	AR	AR
9. Fee transparency legislation	A	R	R	AR	A	AR	AR	AR
10. Legislative ins., reimbursement, tort solutions	A	R	R	AR	AR	AR	AR	AR

## The impact of lifestyle and prevention

First and foremost, this is an issue of individual responsibility. This means that each of us is ultimately responsible for our own health, how we eat, exercise and live. Nevertheless, many collective societal educational and social efforts can help further acceptance of this individual responsibility through application of sound health maintenance principles.

Our society is not used to facing the facts of collective issues. They are not part of the national or state non-Native psyche. Currently, the health care industry plugs holes in the dike that are the result of unhealthy lifestyles. We need to go way upstream and focus on prevention.

Fortunately, we can learn from the positive example of reduction of smoking in America. Much remains to be done. Today's limited but meaningful success is the result of a long-term effort that lasted over a generation. Extensive public education, warning labels, laws banning smoking in public places and a consistent message from the health care community ultimately resulted in societal changes that now appear to have gained a self-reinforcing life of their own.

### **1. Plan a “walkable community.”**

- a. Land use designed to facilitate walking and biking can encourage cardiovascular health. Maintaining safe municipal trail systems, seasonal bike paths, and cleared wintertime walkways permit citizens to practice healthful life habits year around.
- b. Enlightened city planning and architecture can promote a more active lifestyle.
- c. As public demand for exercise opportunities grow, their inclusion in real estate development and city planning can improve property values.

**2. The role of public health as community educator and provider.** Municipal health departments need to serve many more people than those who seek care at the clinic. Promoting wellness and healthful living habits to the entire community is an essential part of the public health mission. This portion of the mission needs to be funded adequately in the budget.

**3. The importance of physical education in the schools— (not a “frill”)** It is important to teach children about the relationship between health, diet and exercise. Not every child will want to join a sports team, but learning to be responsible for their own health by incorporating physical activity into their daily lives is an important health lesson that cannot be ignored.

**4. Eliminate internal inconsistencies and conflicts between programs and objectives.** For example, eliminate financial incentives in schools to promote unhealthy foods. Provide a financial alternative to schools that have come to rely upon income from selling junk foods in the schools.

5. **Incentivize healthy behaviors through workplace activities.** Convince the Top 49 Alaska businesses to educate their employees on healthy lifestyles and offer healthful workplace activities. The Top 49 businesses would represent a large percentage of the Alaska population not already covered by Federal or Alaska Native health care systems. Encourage a **Top 49 Health Summit** to facilitate understanding and participation of these large Alaska businesses.
6. Develop intervention programs for **promoting the traditional rural diet.**
7. **Reconsider rural access to dentistry as part of the study.** Many rural communities lack a sufficient population to support construction of a simple dental facility to house a full time dental practice. The investment required to maintain a facility for use by an itinerant dentist would likely need to be made by the community, possibly partnering with the state. Lack of roads prevents the use of mobile dental clinics that are used in other remote locations worldwide.
8. **Reduce the critical shortage of facilities for alcohol and drug detox, and psychiatric facilities. The lack of services these facilities provide can increase costs in the long run.** Persons affected by alcohol and drug use, and the accidents they cause, account for a significant portion of the population needing care in hospital emergency rooms and psychiatric facilities. Yet Alaska has too few beds to treat those in need of drug and alcohol recovery. As a result we are forced to tolerate that burden of higher healthcare costs. Detox beds make good economic and health policy sense.
9. Find ways to incorporate **U.S Task Force on Preventive Health** recommendations into medical practices, schools, work environments and homes.
10. **Continue the Institute of Circumpolar Health Studies** to analyze common problems and look for solutions that will work for all circumpolar peoples. Similar environments and cultures may result in shared knowledge that can benefit those in northern latitudes. Many health issues in Alaska relate to weather, the environment, subsistence food quantity and quality, potable water and sanitation issues. These are issues shared by other circumpolar peoples. Alliances with other circumpolar countries, and organizations like the Institute for Circumpolar Health Studies may provide new insights in resolving some of these issues.

## **Access improvement recommendations**

1. **Workforce development issues**
  - a. **Expand the WWAMI program.** Improve the supply of primary care providers (family practice physicians, internists, nurse practitioners, physician's assistants), especially outside of Anchorage. Current or potential shortages can be identified in specific specialties.
  - b. **Market the Alaska lifestyle to Outside doctors.** JV with tourism, the State Medical Board, ASMA. Create a dog and pony show.

2. **Investigate and modify the factors that influence the cost of professional liability insurance**
3. **Reduce the number of uninsured Alaskans**— A non-government designed system is probably preferable to a government-operated system.
4. **Investigate pooling smaller companies a la the Foraker Group in an effort to reduce premium costs.**
5. **Promote lower cost models such as neighborhood health centers where appropriate**
6. Educate the public and promote same day access to **alternatives other than hospital emergency rooms**. This involves creation of more readily available and timely access to primary care. Alternatives could include increasing the number of primary care providers and clinics, establishing a variety of disincentives for visits for minor complaints, and establishing a system for care for the uninsured. Emergency rooms themselves may need to be reorganized and redesigned to separate life-threatening emergencies from routine medical needs.
7. **Examine uninsured models elsewhere; e.g. Utah, Maine and Florida.**
8. **Adjust the Medicare (GME) reimbursement formula for Family Practice Residency programs.**
9. **Ensure adequate government reimbursement to doctors, hospitals, community health centers, mid-level practitioners and community health aides without unreasonable bureaucratic burdens.**
10. **Consider making accepting Medicare patients a condition of licensure in Alaska. This has been done in Massachusetts.** Weigh the advantages of increased access for Medicare patients against the negative effect of attracting practitioners to Alaska.
11. Consider **public hearings for health care insurance and professional liability insurance rates** to facilitate price transparency. Currently insurance rates are largely negotiated between large institutional users and insurance carriers. As private contracts, the resulting rates are not disclosed. Individuals have little or no negotiating power and either have to accept or reject rates offered to them. The thought is that greater transparency could result in more favorable, or at least understandable, rates for individual consumers.

## Quality improvement recommendations

1. **Promote and encourage primary prevention, early intervention, and evidence based practices by providers and payers of health care.**
2. **Use meaningful benchmarks; e.g. the Alaska 20/20 example.**
3. **Measure quality of service and make the information publicly available.**

## Cost reduction recommendations

1. **Prevention through Public health education, and early intervention** Preventing illness will save more lives, more lost work time and more healthcare dollars than any other option available to us as a community. Consider the adage “the cheapest health insurance is healthcare you don’t need.” Measures include flu shots when they are recommended and vaccinations against common diseases. Encourage the following behaviors: weight control, regular exercise, avoiding cigarettes and excessive alcohol, fat, salt, and sugar, adequate water consumption, and controlling blood pressure.
2. Encourage and promote the establishment of an **Electronic Medical Record** with a common interface as a means to improved safety and efficiency of health care.
3. **Drug formularies**—utilize where appropriate and effective.
4. **Promote the strong interrelationship between cost of health care and a state fiscal plan** as a means of putting health and budget decisions in perspective.
5. **Fee and billing transparency.** Mandatory disclosure of fees in advance of treatment and “understandability” standards for medical billing.
6. Encourage **local cooperation and sharing of services and facilities.** Promote community by community dialogue on the cost of duplication
7. Analyze the possibility of saving money by **joint purchasing** by appropriate parties.
8. **Allocation and rationing** might be considered if other measures fail to stabilize health care costs.
9. **Suggest legislation to mandate fee transparency**
10. **Consider legislative solutions to tort and liability issues.** Quantify professional liability insurance, patient reimbursement and tort issues—are there legislative solutions? Look at tort reform experiences Outside, such as MICRA, for ideas that might apply to Alaska.



## **SUCCESS STORIES AND PROMISING PROGRAMS**

**Alaska has a number of programs that have proven to be successful:**

### **Lifestyle and prevention**

- The South Central Foundation Primary Care Clinics place great emphasis on prevention. This results in some of the best state data for immunization rates, colorectal screening, mammograms and other standard preventive health interventions.

### **Access**

- Anchorage Neighborhood Health Center
- Other community health centers
- Health aides in rural Alaska
- South Central Foundation has programs that have established same day access. Utilization rates for emergency room use and specialty services have fallen dramatically. Utilization rates of primary care services have also had a modest decrease.

### **Quality**

- Hospital quality control programs have been established in all the major hospitals in Alaska with excellent results. For example, Providence Hospital received national recognition for reducing surgical site infections after joining a national collaborative focus on this issue. Alaska Regional Hospital was recognized for reducing pneumonias after intubations. The Alaska Native Medical Center has developed a national reputation for quality improvement activities working in close association with the Institute for Health Care Improvement. All of our major hospitals have joined the national initiative known as the “100,000 Lives Campaign” to save this many lives in U.S. hospitals by June 2006.

### **Costs**

- The Alaska Federal Health Care Partnership, consisting of the DOD, VA, Coast Guard and the Alaska Native Health System, have been able to reduce costs by bulk purchasing and the sharing of clinical resources.

### **Other programs show promise:**

- The State of Alaska has developed benchmarks for population health improvement targets in a document called “Healthy Alaskans 2010.”

### **Lifestyle and prevention**

- The Anchorage Daily News and a growing number of businesses are discussing wellness incentives in an effort to reduce health care costs. Generally all of these approaches are similar. Employees who agree to join this effort receive personal health care improvement plans and personalized coaching on a regular basis. Some companies offer health care premium discounts as an incentive to participate.

## Access

- Anchorage Project Access is a developing physician initiative in Anchorage (adopting a national model) to provide free care to uninsured individuals who meet certain low-income criteria. Almost all physicians and hospitals currently provide uncompensated care. By organizing this effort, other communities with this program have been able to efficiently provide more care to the uninsured.

## Quality

- A new initiative in the U.S., public reporting of quality indicators in hospitals and nursing homes, is being required by the Center for Medicaid/Medicare Services (CMS). Hospital quality reports are now available on the Web under the title of “Hospital Compare.” Both the federal government and insurance companies are instituting “pay for performance” programs to improve service quality by hospitals and doctors. Countries like Great Britain have already introduced these programs.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Key ideas in the 1994 CWN study “Health Care: Finding an Alaskan Solution”**

1. The health care reform debate is complex and controversial, with multiple players with competing interests.
2. There are significant factual disputes about the health care system.
3. Health care reform creates winners and losers.
4. The most important conclusion for Alaskans: Involvement of Alaskans in the health care debate is vital. Some type of reform is inevitable and Alaskans must work to ensure that reform is responsive to our unique Alaskan conditions.

### **Study Group Participants**

Co-chairs: Thomas Nighswander, M.D and Marvin Swink

Editor: Duane Heyman

Hartig Fellow: Dan Kiley, DDS

Kathy Anderson, Eleanor Andrews, Sergei Bogojavlensky, MD, PC, Steven Boyd, Sharon Cissna, Bill Dann, Fred Dyson, Mark Foster, Alice Galvin, Ed D, Catherine Giessel, FNP-CS, Scott Goldsmith, Ph D, Joe Griffith, Parry Grover, Carolyn Heyman-Layne, David Hudspeth, Jewel Jones, Nancy King, Jonathan Kumin, Edward Lamb, Grace Long, Ph.D, John Patrick Luby, Tana Myrstol, Rebecca Parker, Al Parrish, Joanne Partain-Phelan, Jeff Ranf, Noel Rea, Tessa Rinner, David Snyder, MD, Greg Thies, Lawrence Weiss, Ph D, MS, Heather Wheeler, RD, Tim Wiepking, Kevin Wiley, Joan Wilson, James Yarmon

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Jeff B. Lowenfels	Lewis & Lowenfels
Dr. Elaine P. Maimon	Chancellor, University of Alaska Anchorage
Thomas Nighswander, MD	Assistant Dean, Alaska WWAMI Program; Medical Director, Qualis Health Alaska
Mary Ann Pease	Vice President, Investor Relations, Alaska Communications Systems, Inc.
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Eric Wohlforth	Attorney, Wohlforth, Vassar, Johnson and Brecht
James Yarmon	CEO, Yarmon Investments, Inc.
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Duane Heyman	Executive Director, Commonwealth North

## The Charge

### Alaska Primary Health Care – Opportunities & Challenges

Approved by the Commonwealth North Board on July 20, 2004

#### 1. Questions to be addressed:

- a) How is primary health care currently being delivered to Alaskans?
- b) Are Alaskans receiving quality health care under the current scenario?
- c) What does the future hold for health care in Alaska?
- d) Are there ways to do a better job, such as by bridging the current multiple systems?

#### 2. Scope of study:

The intention of this study is to focus on primary care – the need for Alaskans to receive basic health care. Recognizing there are a number of health care areas which merit similar attention such as long-term care, behavioral health, dental care, etc., the focus of this particular study is to address the past, present and future of primary health care in Alaska. The study will include an update/compilation of previous reports to provide a context.

- The study will briefly explore the historical delivery of health care and how that history impacts the present challenges Alaska faces. In providing this background, the study will also look at the health status of Alaskans – is it above/below that of other states or are we keeping pace?
- The study will explore the “drivers” behind the cost of health care in Alaska and will assess its impact, if any, upon economic development in the State. Access and quality of care/services are a critical determinant of cost within the various health systems in Alaska.
- This study will identify principal health care entities and look at the current multiple health systems – what are the benefits and challenges? Are they sustainable? What impact, if any, do these multiple systems have on the cost and quality of health care?
- There are a number of challenges facing health care providers and recipients. This study will identify those challenges and where possible, potential solutions.
- There are a number of examples where health care entities are collaborating. The study will highlight the best practices and identify additional areas of collaboration. The study will also take into account lessons learned from other states.

#### 3. Nature of report to be issued (Technical, Analytical, or Opinion):

This report will analyze issues, identify a process for addressing them and suggest guiding principles. The report will provide background, current status and recommendations for change or further study. While the report will largely express opinions, it will address technical issues that are necessary aspects of the larger picture.

#### 4. Conflict of interest standards:

The intent of the study is to represent a balance between the geographic, demographic, ethnic and economic interests in Alaska. It is expected that persons with interests in the outcome of the study will be members of the study group and will participate in its deliberations. Study group leaders should request that study group members identify their interests relative to specific points they advocate.

#### 5. Measure of success:

This study will succeed by generating a greater understanding of and insight into health care issues in Alaska and areas in which health providers can work together for the mutual benefit of all Alaskans.

## Resource People Interviewed

- 9.23.04 Ed Lamb, Al Parrish—Hospital perspectives
- 9.30.04 Barbara Russell—Premera
- 10.07.04 Alex Spector—VA, Lt. Col. Vic Rosenbaum—Elmendorf Hospital, Maj. Ward Hinger-  
-TRICARE
- 10.14.04 Commissioner Joel Gilbertson
- 10.21.04 Paul Sherry—Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium
- 10.28.04 Tessa Rinner—Denali Commission
- 10.28.04 The Maine Plan (Sergei Bogojavlensky, MD)
- 11.11.04 Norman Wilder MD, MBA (Regional), Roy Davis MD (Providence)—Quality and cost  
control initiatives
- 11.18.04 Rod Betit—State Hospital & Nursing Home Association
- 12.02.04 Catherine Schumacher MD—Access to health care in Anchorage
- 12.09.04 Cathy Giessel, MS, FNP-CS—The role of nurse practitioners
- 12.09.04 Harold Johnston, MD—Program Director, Alaska family Practice Residency
- 1.06.05 Joan Fisher – Executive Director, Anchorage Neighborhood Health Center and Medical  
Director, Dr. Tom Hunt and Beverly Wooley, Director, Anchorage Municipal Health  
Department
- 1.27.05 Janet Trautwein – VP Government Affairs, National Assn of Health Underwriters
- 1.28.05 (Forum) panel discussion with Commissioner Joel Gilbertson, Al Parrish, Randall  
Burns—Alaska Small Hospital Performance Improvement Network, Dr. David Snyder—  
Alaska Native Medical Center
- 2.03.05 James Jordan, Executive Director, Alaska State Medical Association
- 3.10.05 Ann Conway, Maine Center for Public Health
- 3.25.05 Joseph Ditre, Executive Director, Consumers for Affordable Health Care Foundation  
(Maine)