FOR YOUR INFORMATION
The Idaho Statesman
Boise, Idaho
Sunday May 7, 2017
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Has anyone died due to lack of health care access? Insurance coverage is factor

Some question whether it's possible to find a definite cause-and-effect relationship between insurance and death.

The ongoing dispute over whether to fill the so-called Medicaid gap in Idaho has brought forward stories of people who actually died because of the lack of access to health care.

The story of Jenny Steinke, a woman from Idaho Falls, has been frequently cited in Idaho. Steinke died at age 36 from an asthma attack after her condition went untreated for years because she couldn't afford health insurance, according to the (Idaho Falls) Post Register.

But how often does lack of health insurance, or access to health care, cause people to die?

That has been a subject of debate, with two fact-checking organizations — **FactCheck.org** and Politifact — looking into it. Some question whether it's possible to find a definite cause-and-effect relationship between insurance and death.

Researchers have found links for years between insurance and health outcomes. And several high-profile studies have drawn connections between lack of insurance and higher mortality rates.

"Because people without health coverage are less likely than those with insurance to have regular outpatient care, they are more likely to be hospitalized for avoidable health problems and to experience declines in their overall health," according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonpartisan health care information nonprofit. "When they are hospitalized, uninsured people receive fewer diagnostic and therapeutic services and also have higher mortality rates than those with insurance."

Some studies cited by the foundation looked at what happened to patients once they were hospitalized:

- A 2009 study published in the Journal of Public Health found a 60 percent higher mortality rate among uninsured American children in the hospital.

- A study published in 2011 in the American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine concluded that "the uninsured have a higher mortality and receive fewer procedures when compared with privately insured patients treated at the same hospitals."

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- A 2010 study in The American Journal of Surgery hypothesized that insurance coverage wouldn't affect the outcomes of patients with blunt and penetrating traumas, such as car crash injuries and gunshot wounds. But the researchers concluded that insurance coverage was actually "a potent predictor" of how well a patient would do. They found a higher death rate among uninsured patients.

A frequently cited study published in 2009 in the American Journal of Public Health found a 25 percent higher risk of death among uninsured compared with privately insured adults. The researchers calculated 44,789 deaths among Americans aged 18 to 64 in a single year that they said were tied to lack of health insurance.

"The uninsured have a higher risk of death when compared to the privately insured, even after taking into account socioeconomics, health behaviors and baseline health," the study's lead author, Dr. Andrew Wilper, said at the time. "We doctors have many new ways to prevent deaths from hypertension, diabetes and heart disease — but only if patients can get into our offices and afford their medications."

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