How will the Affordable Care Act help diversify the health care workforce?

Takeaways:

- A diverse health care workforce will help to increase access to quality care and address disparities in care that impact certain racial and ethnic populations.
- Physicians and nurses are more likely to serve their own communities; creating a more diverse medical workforce will increase access to quality care across the nation.
- The 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA) includes critical funding for new as well as existing efforts to diversify the nation’s health care workforce through academic programs, mentoring and employment opportunities.

Overview

Increasing the diversity of the health care workforce has been a critical part of the nation’s strategy to improve health and health care for more than a decade. Yet progress has been limited. Relative to the U.S. population, African Americans and Latinos are still significantly underrepresented within the ranks of physicians, nurses and dentists. Less than 5 percent of physicians or dentists are African American or Hispanic. Only 5.4 percent of nurses are African American; by comparison, 83.2 percent are white.

THE IMPACT OF A DIVERSE WORKFORCE

Research has shown that access and quality of care is improved—and disparities of care are reduced—when a health care workforce reflects the racial, ethnic, economic and cultural diversity of the patients it serves. A diverse pool of health care providers is more able to overcome the language and cultural barriers that often prevent patients from getting the best quality care. Diverse providers are also more likely to practice in underserved communities, expanding the health care options for those people.

Increasing the diversity of health care providers would enhance the health care workforce’s cultural competency and ability to serve patients with language differences, reduce the shortage of medical professionals in underserved areas, reduce inequities in academic medicine and address variables that make it difficult for patients to navigate the health care system.¹

THE ROLE OF THE ACA

The ACA expands federal programs that provide health care in underserved communities. These expansions will create professional opportunities for doctors, nurses and other health care workers from underrepresented racial, ethnic and economic groups. These professionals often already live in the targeted communities, or wish to provide care specifically to these communities.
One of these programs, federal Community Health Centers, now serves 19.5 million people at 8,000 sites, regardless of patients’ ability to pay. The ACA commits $11 billion toward creating 350 additional Community Health Centers. The ACA will also invest $1.5 billion to expand the National Health Service Corps (NHSC), which offers health professionals loan repayment help and scholarships if they work in rural counties or inner cities, where they are most needed. Currently, 33 percent of clinicians who earn their degrees with NHSC support are minorities and half work in Community Health Centers.

The ACA will help to fund or establish several programs intent on changing the composition of the health care workforce. Through Health Professional Opportunity Grants, health care-related training will be offered to low-income workers. The opportunity grant program focuses on organizations serving areas with large African American, Hispanic or American Indian populations. The ACA will also expand the NHSC through a $1.5 billion grant over five years to address the shortage of health professionals in underserved communities.²

In addition, the ACA will create the National Health Care Workforce Commission to work with federal and state governments, spur innovation and make recommendations to the administration on workforce goals, including issues related to demand and training. Congress has yet to appropriate funding for the commission. The National Center for Health Workforce Analysis will work with the commission to provide state grants to develop the workforce at that level. Teaching health centers and increased graduate medical training positions will also contribute to the effort.

### Total U.S. Physicians by Race/Ethnicity 2008

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<tr>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of physicians</th>
<th>Percentage of U.S. population</th>
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WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- **Building Bridges, Making Connections (RWJF)**
- **The Dental Pipeline Program’s Impact on Access Disparities and Student Diversity (JADA)**
- **Enhancing Diversity in the Nursing Workforce (AACN)**
- **Diversity in the Physician Workforce: Facts & Figures 2010 (AAMC)**

1. [http://impactdiverseworkforce.org/healthcare-professionals/health-disparities](http://impactdiverseworkforce.org/healthcare-professionals/health-disparities)