



LEO J. SHAPIRO & ASSOCIATES LLC

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Physician Avoidance

It has always been true that many people are reluctant to see their doctor. This reluctance increases during hard times. The percentage of households that report cutting back on medical expenses has gradually increased during the past year and reached a high of 31% in February 2008. For the prior year, this percentage averaged just 21%. Although expenditure for food and clothing are squeezed more by hard times than medical expenses, an economic slowdown also results in a slowdown in the delivery of healthcare.

Now, a study completed in March 2008 by Leo J. Shapiro & Associates finds that 40% of adults say they are more inclined to wait it out before seeing a doctor than they were in the past. A like percent (40%) say they are more inclined now to treat themselves with over-the-counter medications or herbal remedies before seeing a doctor. Both of these percentages are above those who say they have become less inclined to wait it out before seeing a doctor or to treat themselves with over the counter or herbal remedies, respectively 24% and 26%. Many adults (49%) also say that they are now more likely to consult a pharmacist than in the past. Slowdown in visits to physicians may well be raising the importance and authority of the pharmacist.

Physician avoidance is substantial among households who do not have health insurance (79%), but is also occurring among the large majority with health coverage (36%). This suggests that access to physicians is being resisted, not just on an economic basis, but also as a matter of convenience and perhaps a loss of confidence that physicians will help.

The growth of walk-in clinics at retail stores is a counterpoint to physician avoidance. While still in nascent stages, one in five households reports that there is a walk-in clinic in a retail store in which they shop, and 6% of U.S. households say they have visited such a clinic, having made four visits so far on average. Retail store clinics are generally operated by nurse practitioners and see patients without an appointment at relatively modest visit charges. The growth in over-the-counter remedies and herbal treatment is a second counterpoint supporting reluctance to see physicians.

It can be argued that delayed care from physicians stands to increase rather than to reduce the cost of healthcare, because costs are controlled with early treatment and quicker recovery. What is missing from this argument is that people who avoid seeing their physicians are not

necessarily passive about getting treatment. The use of pharmacists for counsel, growing access to online medical information, and emergence of retail clinics indicates that patients are not ignoring health problems, but relying more often on alternative sources for help.

Reluctance to visit physicians for treatment does not carry over to physical checkups. There may be growing acceptance by the public of physicians' role in preventive healthcare. The Shapiro study found that 35% of American adults say they are now more likely to visit a physician for a physical checkup than in the past, two points more than those who say they are less likely to do so (33%). Americans may increasingly be seeing physicians as a source to preserve health than a source of early stage treatment. They are slowing down visits to physicians when something goes wrong, but more often relying on physicians for physical checkups to maintain their health. Economic hard times appear to support this trend. In the face of hard times, people want to stay healthy.

Health professionals may be of divided opinion as to whether a shift of physician visits from first-line treatment to preventive care will improve the health of the nation. Insurers and health economists may more readily see benefits in this trend. Regardless of what the professional position is, it will be important to respond to the newly emerging consumer behavior in structuring the delivery of healthcare.

*For more information on studies underlying this report,
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