



Health care for kids falling short

By Carol M. Ostrom, Seattle Times health reporter, 10/11/07

The nation's children, including those in the Seattle area, are only getting the right medical care less than half the time they see pediatricians, according to a study of children's medical records in 12 cities, touted as the first comprehensive look at the quality of children's health care. The study found that children are often not receiving basic recommended preventive care, such as **preschool vaccinations and screenings of teen girls for chlamydia**. And many aren't even getting standard care for chronic conditions such as **asthma or depression**.

"I was very surprised — and very distressed — about our results," said Dr. Rita Mangione-Smith, the study's lead author and a researcher at Seattle Children's Hospital Research Institute and associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington School of Medicine. "There are a lot of failures there. And on very basic things that people agree we should be doing."

The nonprofit RAND Corp. contributed to the research, which is published in the New England Journal of Medicine. It was funded by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the California HealthCare Foundation. The records showed that **children got the proper care only 46.5 percent of the time**. It relied on records collected between 1998 and 2000 of 1,536 children in urban areas who had actually seen doctors, and for whom researchers were able to obtain one or more medical records.

Experts said it is unlikely that care has improved significantly since then, except for some improvements in immunization rates and asthma care. And almost all the children in this study were insured. "What we have here is the best-case scenario," Mangione-Smith said. "I would shudder to think what the number would be for uninsured kids." **Pediatricians were best at delivering care for acute problems such as urinary-tract infections, fever or diarrhea**. Nearly 68 percent of the time, they gave children the care recommended by established medical guidelines.

But **when children had chronic conditions, such as asthma or allergies, they got recommended care less than 53 percent of the time**. For preventive care, such as so-called "well-child" care that includes measuring height and weight, or screening for sexually transmitted disease, pediatricians delivered the recommended care less than 41 percent of the time. Fewer than a third of children aged 3 to 6, and only 15 percent of the adolescents, were weighed and measured when they got regular checkups. Given the obesity epidemic, Mangione-Smith said, "I think you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone who says we shouldn't be tracking weights."

Mangione-Smith advises parents to go to the pediatrician armed with as much information as possible. "Come in with your own checklist," she said. "Ask your doctor, 'Is their weight OK today? Should she be checked for anemia?'"