

Another big year for issues of health in 2010

BY FRANK GLUCK • FGLUCK@NEWS-PRESS.COM • DECEMBER 29, 2009

1:10 A.M. — Between national health insurance reform and anxiety over swine flu, medical news dominated the headlines in 2009. Next year likely won't be different.

Insurance reform

Barring unforeseen political quakes, Congress will likely have sweeping legislation on President Barack Obama's desk in early 2010.

The U.S. Senate and House of Representatives will need to square their different versions of reform, but an insurance mandate for most Americans is likely.

A study by the pro-reform think tank FamiliesUSA predicts this will mean an additional 2.4 million Floridians will have health insurance by 2019.

Of course, the plan has many detractors.

"The only way to save money is to deny services, and from this legislation, it looks like they will be dismantling Medicare and Medicaid," said Ann Wilke, executive director of the Lee County Medical Society.

Medicaid cuts

The state Legislature is expected to make deep cuts next year to its share of Medicaid reimbursements to doctors and hospitals.

Federal stimulus money that had been bolstering reimbursements are set to expire by the end of 2010.

Rep. Gary Aubuchon, R-Cape Coral, recently said that lawmakers will likely make cuts and/or tighten Medicaid eligibility requirements.

The issue is of prime concern to Lee Memorial Health System, the county's largest health care provider.

Because of Medicaid's low reimbursement rates, the system absorbed almost \$17 million in Medicaid-related costs.

"We basically got bailed out by the stimulus package," said system Chief Financial Officer John Wiest, who doubts more federal dollars will bolster hospitals anytime soon. "I have to tell you, I'm pretty pessimistic."

Swine flu

Reports of swine flu cases have been on the decline nationally for almost two months, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Public health officials report that about 10,000 people have died in the United States from swine flu-related illnesses. Five people have died in Lee.

But, as of Dec. 16, only sporadic flu activity was reported in Lee and Collier counties.

"Cases are ebbing locally," said Dr. Judith Hartner, director of the Lee County Health Department.

The big question: Will this be a lasting trend in 2010 or a temporary ebb in the pandemic?

Thomas Frieden, the director of the CDC, offered this morsel of uncertainty during a Dec. 10 press briefing:

"The only, I think, certain answer is that only time will tell what the future will hold," Frieden said. "But we know that the more people who get vaccinated lower the likelihood there will be of additional cases or third wave."

Lee's health department will continue next year to offer free vaccinations only at its Pondella Road clinic in North Fort Myers. Otherwise, local pharmacies are now reporting they have the vaccine in stock.