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Guest columnist

Make quality care with dignity a reality for all Americans

By **Risa Lavizzo-Mourey**
Special to The Times

I've just come home to the Seattle of my childhood to speak out about a form of health-care discrimination that my doctor parents fought against here when I was a little girl and that still dictates who gets health care and who does not.

Growing up, I vividly remember my parents talking about a woman named Odessa Brown who was dying of leukemia. She had four kids and, like most poor folks in those days, no health insurance. Her tragic situation forced the community to address a growing health-care crisis among the poorest city residents who were uninsured. A year after she died, Children's Hospital set up the Odessa Brown Children's Clinic. My mother was its medical director and even coined the motto the clinic still uses, "Quality Care with Dignity."

The neglect and discrimination that kept Odessa Brown and her neighbors from getting the health care they needed now has spread across geographic, ethnic and socioeconomic boundaries. Somewhere around 800,000 people of all ages, races, genders and income levels are uninsured in Washington, and the numbers are growing.

People today living without health insurance face a kind of medical discrimination my parents could never have imagined. Without an insurance card, many health-care providers won't let you in the door. An emergency-room doctor will mend the broken arm of an uninsured patient, but the person will struggle to pay the bill and will probably feel priced out of needed follow-up treatment.

Not even the recent good news about the state's dip in the unemployment rate is a remedy for this health-care crisis. Indeed, while the number of unemployed in Washington is at a seven-year low, the number of uninsured workers is at an all-time high. Having a steady job no longer comes with a guarantee of health insurance. Nationally, eight out of 10 uninsured people are in working families. Tens of millions of employed Americans cannot afford health-care coverage. And as the cost of health care continues to skyrocket, fewer individuals and families have insurance and fewer businesses can afford to offer insurance to their employees.

These days, almost everyone I meet knows someone without health insurance. They could be relatives, friends, co-workers or neighbors who are forced to gamble that they do not get sick or seriously injured. They live in fear that their child's cold could turn into pneumonia, or that an infection will not go away on its own.

For too many Washingtonians, their worst fears are becoming reality. Uninsured Americans live sicker and die younger than those who have health insurance. An estimated 50 people in this country die each day because they are uninsured and cannot get the medical care they need. Being uninsured means no allergist to test your asthmatic child, and no gastroenterologist to conduct a colonoscopy to check for colon cancer. It means not having regular checkups and going without care when it is needed. It means allowing a minor illness to erupt into a life-threatening emergency because medical care is delayed.

As a doctor, this grim situation saddens me and offends my vow to help and heal. As a citizen, taxpayer and employer, it enrages me. It is time for our state and national leaders to stop bickering about who is to blame for rising

health-care costs, set aside the political posturing and finally make health-care coverage a top priority.

It is time for us to come together like the community did for Odessa Brown a generation ago. Join me and get involved in "Cover the Uninsured Week" through Sunday. Visit www.covertheuninsured.org to urge our nation's leaders to make sure that everyone here in Seattle and across the country has access to the health-care coverage they need.

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