

The Waiting Game

Jeffrey M. Weinberg, MD

In the depths of an economic recession, it is natural for individuals to consider how financial conditions will affect their life and livelihood. Many have been quick to tell me how lucky I am to be a physician because the profession is recession proof. I am sure many of you have heard similar comments. But are physicians recession proof? We certainly know that elective procedures such as cosmetics will be affected in this economic climate, but what about our medical dermatology practices? What kind of impact can we expect? I have certainly noted a decrease in patient volume and an increase in patient no-shows during the past several months. It is hard to ascertain if this change is due to the economy, cold weather, or a combination of factors.

An article in the *Washington Post* noted that patients are indeed delaying medical care because of their personal financial situations.¹ The authors noted that “[t]he global economic crunch is forcing a growing number of Americans to scale back on medical care” and “[c]onsumers are attempting their own form of triage, pushing off seemingly less-urgent services in the hope that their financial health will improve.” They provided several poignant examples of individuals delaying important medical evaluation. A woman from Virginia with multiple sclerosis decided to forego annual magnetic resonance imaging; a woman in Texas ignored a breast lump for a while, which was eventually diagnosed as metastatic malignancy; and a waitress from Maryland treated an eye infection with steroid drops once daily rather

than twice daily as recommended by her physician because of the cost of the medication and her diminishing revenue from tips. One woman interviewed did not plan to get an annual mammogram this year, even though her mother died of breast cancer at 56 years of age.¹

A recent survey released by the Rockefeller Foundation and *Time* magazine revealed some disturbing trends.² Notably, there has been an increase in the number of individuals who have not filled a prescription, utilized retirement savings to pay for healthcare, or skipped a physician visit for themselves or a child. One-quarter of the 2008 respondents noted that they had opted not to see a doctor in 2008 because of the cost, a 7% increase from 2007. Ten percent reported they did not take a child to a physician for the same reason.²

We do not know how long this economic downturn will last or how deep it will go. As we try to maintain our own economic stability, all we can do is try to be as sensitive as possible to our patients and their needs, and try to ensure that our patients continue to receive necessary healthcare services. Hopefully we will all get through this together as quickly and healthfully as possible.

REFERENCES

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From the Department of Dermatology, St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center, New York, New York; Beth Israel Medical Center, New York; and Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, New York.

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