

March 21, 2011

To the Editor:

Today's article, "Short of the mark" (Carlson and Evans, 3/21), misses the mark on the value that not-for-profit community hospitals provide to their community. Focusing on charity care fails to account for the myriad of programs and services that hospitals provide, which are tailored to the needs of their own unique community and provide every bit as much value to the community as charity care.

Part of the problem is the Schedule H form itself, it has serious flaws and doesn't provide a full picture of a hospital's community benefit. A study for the American Hospital Association conducted by Brad Gray with the Urban Institute identified numerous deficiencies in the current Schedule H form that undercount community benefit, particularly for multi-hospital systems. Today's story is incomplete at best and fails to credit the difficulty hospitals sometimes encounter in determining which patients qualify for financial assistance.

Modern's story also fails to explore some of the more obvious overriding issues: How do you measure the money losing burn unit that cares for some of the most fragile patients; what about the mobile health van that travels to areas underserved by medical care and helps keep people healthy and out of the emergency department; and what's the value of services that improve the quality of life for patients, such as nutrition classes or free glasses for school age children. These examples represent just a few of the many ways hospitals serve their community whose value can't easily be reduced to dollars and cents calculation.

The great strength of community benefit is that hospitals and communities can tailor it to their needs and not be hampered by a rigid formula that prescribes specific programs or services that aren't responsive to their community. Schedule H is intended to be a tool so communities can engage in these types of productive discussions about needs and resources – not simply a calculation of who's done the most. Modern does a disservice to the field by suggesting that it is.

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