Perspectives of family physicians on the care of uninsured pregnant women in Montreal, Canada

Objective:
Canada’s healthcare system is based on the principle of universal coverage. However, no official provisions are made for the medically uninsured. Studies have shown that uninsured pregnant women have inadequate access to prenatal and obstetrical services that favor healthy maternal and child outcomes. This qualitative study aimed to explore the perspectives of family physicians who provided care to uninsured pregnant women.

Methods:
Eight family physicians affiliated to two Montreal-based primary-care clinics and one tertiary care hospital between 2004 and 2007 were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Data were treated using thematic analysis.

Results:
Uninsured pregnant patients were characterized by physicians as socially vulnerable, with precarious immigration statuses that limited access to health services. While negative pregnancy or delivery outcomes were not reported, uninsured patients were not thought to benefit from the same standard of perinatal care as their insured counterparts. The majority of respondents considered the care of uninsured women a professional obligation, regardless of their perspective of the patient’s situation. Caring for this population was considered challenging, engendering psychological stress, increased workload, and occasional tensions with other health providers and administrators.

Conclusion:
In the present context, family physicians are left to negotiate the healthcare system in an attempt to provide adequate perinatal care for their uninsured pregnant patients. This situation has repercussions on physicians, on patients and, ultimately, on infants. Leadership is required to ensure that all pregnant women in Canada have access to appropriate healthcare and are not excluded from a system purported to be “universal”.