Medicaid Expansion Reduces Death Rate for Three Major Cancers

States that expanded access under the Affordable Care Act had fewer deaths from newly diagnosed breast, lung and colorectal cancer.

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When some states expanded Medicaid six years ago, as allowed by the Affordable Care Act (also known as Obamacare), people who were newly diagnosed with breast, lung and colorectal cancer saw their risk of death decrease, largely due to diagnosis at an earlier stage, according to a new study, reports the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.

The study was published in JAMA Network Open by researchers at Dana-Farber, Brigham Women's Hospital and Harvard University.

Using the National Cancer Database, researchers tracked over 500,000 patients across the United States who were newly diagnosed with breast, lung or colorectal cancer between 2012 and 2015. Researchers then compared the mortality rates of patients in states that expanded Medicaid with those of patients where Medicaid was not expanded. (Medicaid was expanded in 24 states and Washington, DC, in January 2014—that number is now 39).

The risk of dying from these cancers declined by 2% in states that expanded Medicaid; no such change was seen among patients in states that didn't expand Medicaid. Extrapolating that benefit to the 69,000 patients diagnosed with cancer yearly in all states that expanded Medicaid, that translates to 1,384 lives saved each year, the researchers calculated.

No statistical survival benefit was seen within a cancer stage, which led researchers to conclude that diagnosing cancer at an earlier stage was specifically responsible for the decline in mortality associated with Medicaid expansion.

In addition, researchers discovered that mortality improvements were seen in both Black and white patients as well as those with the lowest median household income.

"Increased Medicaid coverage may remove barriers to accessing the health care system for screening and timely symptom evaluation, and that can translate into better outcomes for patients," said study lead author Miranda Lam, MD, MBD, of Dana-Farber, Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

For related coverage, read “Medicaid Expansion Leads to Less Metastatic Cancer” and “Medicaid Expansion Tied to Decline in Cancer Death Rate.”

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