

# Medical Student Views of Healthcare Reform in the United States, 2009

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## ABSTRACT

### Purpose

To assess the opinions of Albert Einstein College of Medicine (Einstein) medical students about U.S. healthcare reform in the context of the 2008 U.S. presidential election through the use of an online survey. The study additionally evaluates the influences on students' healthcare opinions and whether there is sufficient instruction given to medical students about healthcare systems.

### Method

During January and February 2009, first-year and second-year (classes of 2011 and 2012) Einstein medical students (n=362) were surveyed about U.S. healthcare using a web-based electronic survey. The survey included questions about students' healthcare views and influences, political views, and education related to healthcare systems.

### Results

With a response rate of 56%, the survey showed that, among Einstein students, the most popular reform to the U.S. healthcare system would be a multipayer system (41%) in which all U.S. citizens would have access to healthcare paid for by the U.S. government, but could also choose to obtain private insurance. More than 86% of the respondents felt that they had not received adequate education in medical school about the U.S. healthcare system. Seventy-four percent of respondents supported Barack Obama in the 2008 U.S. presidential election.

### Conclusions

Einstein students overwhelmingly recognize the need for reform in the U.S. healthcare system, and students are confident that, under Barack Obama's leadership, the number of uninsured American citizens will decrease in the next four years. Survey findings also reveal the need for improved medical student education about the U.S. healthcare system.

## INTRODUCTION

The urgent need for reform in the U.S. healthcare system was illustrated by the results of the 2007 National Health Interview Survey, which demonstrated that at least 43,000,000 Americans lacked health-insurance coverage (Adams et al. 2008). Additionally, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services highlighted a March 2009 report by Families USA and the Lewin Group that showed that one in three Americans under the age of 65 lacked health insurance at some point during 2007–8 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2009). Even those with secure health insurance could benefit from reform, as the Institute of Medicine determined that there is a "spillover effect" from the cost of taking care of the millions of uninsured Americans that in turn detrimentally affects the health-care of those with health insurance (Families USA 2009; Mitka 2009).

Highlighting the U.S. healthcare crisis in his first address to a joint session of Congress, President Obama identified it as one of three items in his budget that would receive particular focus and necessary investment, regardless of the preexisting economic recession (Obama 2009). Prior to the president's address to Congress, during the 2008 presidential election campaign, healthcare reform was a central issue among the candidates. The Republican nominee, Senator John McCain, described a plan in which health-insurance companies would compete across state lines and a tax credit would be available to people who could not afford to buy health insurance (McCain 2008). On the other hand, Barack Obama proposed requiring employers to provide health insurance to their workers, as well as allowing all Americans to purchase the insurance plans offered to the members of the U.S. Congress (Obama 2008). The politicized environment surrounding healthcare is the basis for our survey of first- and second-year medical students' opinions on healthcare reform.

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Data related to medical students' opinions about healthcare reform are fairly limited. There have been previous medical student surveys on U.S. healthcare, but the most recent extensive survey is from 2002, before Barack Obama was a nationally recognized figure and certainly before anyone predicted the economic decline of 2008 (Frank et al. 2008; Huebner et al. 2006; Agrawal et al. 2005; Simon et al. 1999; Schnipper and Dorwart 1995; Wilkes et al. 1994; Hodgson et al. 1993). It is crucial to understand the opinions of current medical students regarding U.S. healthcare reform, as these students will in the future be the physicians working within the proposed reforms of the healthcare system. Furthermore, it would be helpful to understand necessary changes to curricula in medical school education because changes to the system could significantly affect medical students' careers. Improved medical student education regarding healthcare systems will most certainly enhance patient care.

While previous studies have evaluated several areas of medical students' views of healthcare reform, our survey was conducted following the political climate of a historic presidential election. Additionally, our survey used a password-protected, web-based system in order to obtain rapid and secure responses from the first- and second-year medical students at Einstein.

**METHODS**

A 16-question web-based electronic survey (see the appendix) was developed to determine the opinions of first-year (class of 2012) and second-year (class of 2011) medical students at Einstein about healthcare in the United States. The Committee on Clinical Investigations of Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University approved this study as an exempt research study since it followed accepted survey procedures while precluding the collection of protected health information. The list of first-year and second-year students who were surveyed was derived from the school directory of the entering classes of 2011 and 2012. Therefore, transfer students from other schools and students within Einstein who had postponed graduation were not included in the study. The only other students excluded from the study were the four students from the class of 2011 who conducted the study. In all, 362 students were eligible to complete the survey: 179 from the class of 2011 and 183 from the class of 2012.

The survey questions were developed through the collaboration of Einstein students and Einstein faculty from the department of epidemiology & population health. Several questions were original questions developed by the authors and some were variations of questions from previously published surveys (Huebner et al. 2006; Agrawal et al. 2005). The survey was piloted on third-

year Einstein medical students from the class of 2010 to evaluate wording, clarity, and question order. On January 9, 2009, a cover letter was sent by email from the authors to the 362 eligible medical students, asking for voluntary participation in the survey and providing an electronic link to a website where the survey could be completed, along with a username and a randomly generated unique password needed to access the survey. Individual reminder emails were sent at one-week intervals from the start of the survey and general reminder emails were also sent through the class listserves. The survey was closed on February 9, 2009. Respondents' names were not included in data transcription for analysis in order to maintain confidentiality.

**RESULTS****Respondents' Characteristics**

From the 362 eligible students, 204 responses were received, with an overall response rate of 56%, a first-year student response rate of 50% (92/183), and a second-year student response rate of 63% (112/179). The gender breakdown of respondents was relatively equal, with 104 female respondents (51%) and 100 male respondents (49%). Forty-three percent of students were undecided about their future medical career choice, and the most popular future career choice selected was a subspecialty of internal medicine or pediatrics (21%).

**Political Views**

Approximately three-quarters of respondents voted in the 2008 U.S. presidential election, with a majority of students identifying with the Democratic party (59%) and an even larger majority of students supporting Barack Obama for president (74%). Table 1 displays further details about the students' political views. Economy and jobs (89%), healthcare (85%), and education (37%) were the three issues most frequently chosen as those currently most important in the United States.

**Education and Influences on Healthcare**

More than 86% of respondents felt that thus far in their medical school education they had not received adequate instruction about the U.S. healthcare system. When asked to choose what "strongly influenced," "minimally influenced," and "did not influence" their opinions about the U.S. healthcare system, the only source of information that a majority of respondents (68%) felt "strongly influenced" them was personal/family experiences (table 2). A majority of respondents felt that required medical school coursework did not have any influence on their healthcare opinions.

**Table 1: Political Views of Medical Students (data expressed as number (%), N=204)**

Did you vote in the 2008 U.S. presidential election?	
Yes	150 (73.5)
No	38 (18.6)
Not eligible to vote	16 (7.8)
Whom did you support in the 2008 U.S. presidential election?	
John McCain	48 (23.5)
Barack Obama	150 (73.5)
Other	6 (2.9)
With which U.S. political party do you most identify?	
Democrat	120 (58.8)
Republican	34 (16.7)
Other	7 (3.4)
None	43 (21.1)

**Healthcare Views**

A sizable majority of respondents (70%) indicated that they felt that the U.S. healthcare system has “major flaws.” Additionally, respondents were asked to evaluate how they felt about healthcare coverage in the United States by choosing “excellent,” “good,” “fair,” “poor,” or “no opinion.” There were no respondents who felt that healthcare coverage was “excellent.” Nineteen percent (38/204) felt that coverage was “good,” 43% selected “fair,” 37% selected “poor,” and 2% of respondents had “no opinion.” The three most frequently chosen options for the most important issues facing U.S. healthcare were that “many people do not have access to healthcare” (88%), the “the cost of healthcare is too high” (76%), and that there are too “few preventative care services and education” (60%). Table 3 indicates respondents’ views about how healthcare in the United States compares to healthcare systems of other industrialized nations.

Most respondents (82%) felt that it is the responsibil-

ity of the U.S. government to ensure that all of its citizens have basic healthcare coverage. Survey respondents were also asked to choose which modification to the U.S. healthcare system they would most prefer; 81% of respondents chose some form of universal healthcare as their top choice. Approximately 50% (83/165) of those who chose a form of universal healthcare felt that a multipayer system would be the best modification for the U.S. healthcare system.

Table 4 examines students’ opinions about healthcare modifications based on whom they supported in the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Single-payer government delivery was chosen as the preferred modification to the U.S. healthcare system by 14% (17/120) of those respondents who identified as Democrat and by none of those respondents who identified as Republican. Still, a multipayer healthcare system was supported by a plurality of both those who identified as Democrat (44%, 53/210) and those who identified as Republican (32%, 11/34). A majority of respondents (73%) felt that in four years, with Barack Obama as president, there would be an appreciable increase in the amount of money spent on healthcare. A majority of respondents (60%) also felt that there would be an appreciable decrease in the number of uninsured U.S. citizens.

**DISCUSSION**

We found that the views about healthcare among first- and second-year medical students at Einstein were most heavily influenced by personal or family experiences and least affected by medical school faculty and coursework. Eighty percent of students believed our country was worse than other industrialized countries in the world in terms of citizen access to healthcare, and 70% believed that the United States was better in medical technology development than other industrialized countries. Overall, 91% of respondents thought that there should be reforms in the healthcare system.

Medical students’ ideas on healthcare are important to study, especially in an era of potential healthcare reform, as these students are the future practitioners of medicine, and changes, or a lack thereof, to the existing

**Table 2: Influences on Medical Student Views of U.S. Healthcare System (data expressed as number (%), N=204)**

	Strongly Influenced	Minimally Influenced	Did Not Influence
Peers in medical school	37 (18.1)	114 (55.9)	53 (26)
Faculty in medical school	24 (11.8)	113 (55.4)	67 (32.8)
Required medical school coursework	11 (5.4)	81 (39.7)	112 (54.9)
Extracurricular activities in medical school	71 (34.8)	84 (41.2)	49 (24.0)
Personal/family experiences	138 (67.7)	59 (28.9)	7 (3.4)
Media	79 (38.7)	103 (50.5)	22 (10.8)

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**Table 3: Healthcare System—U.S. vs. Other Industrialized Nations (data expressed as number (%), N=204)**

	Better	Same	Worse	Do Not Know
Access to care for everyone	17 (8.3)	17 (8.3)	163 (79.9)	7 (3.4)
Freedom of choice of physician for patients	93 (45.6)	42 (20.6)	38 (18.6)	31 (15.2)
Waiting time for medical treatments	113 (55.4)	40 (19.6)	26 (12.8)	25 (12.2)
High-quality care	107 (52.5)	64 (31.4)	13 (6.4)	20 (9.8)
Medical technology development	144 (70.6)	42 (20.6)	1 (0.5)	17 (8.3)
Prevention of disease	23 (11.3)	46 (22.6)	97 (47.6)	38 (18.6)

system will directly affect them. New data are necessary to evaluate medical students' opinions, as the political and economic climate has changed significantly since 2002, the year of the last extensive medical student survey. Because our survey commenced following a historic presidential election, we attempted to integrate political affiliations with the healthcare beliefs of medical students at Einstein.

In the 2002 survey, 51% of medical students surveyed preferred a "multipayer/universal" healthcare system in which both the government and private institutions would play a role in providing health insurance (Huebner et al. 2006). In an attempt to compare responses and evaluate changes in medical students' opinions in the past seven years, several questions in our survey were variations of questions from the 2002 survey. Although a lower percentage of respondents (41%, 83/204) in our survey chose a "multipayer" system (using a definition similar to the one in the 2002 survey), the "multipayer" system was still the most chosen reform option. In concordance with the 2002 survey, our respondents overwhelmingly (81%, 165/204) supported some form of universal healthcare.

With regard to the future of U.S. healthcare, there have been several surveys that evaluate physicians' opinions (McCormick et al. 2009; McCormick et al. 2004;

Ackermann and Carroll 2003; Simon et al. 1999; Blendon et al. 1994). A comprehensive physician survey conducted in 2007 concluded that 49% of respondents supported financial incentives to promote the purchase of medical insurance, while 42% supported a single-payer healthcare plan (McCormick et al. 2009). In contrast, in our survey, only 25% of respondents favored some form of "single-payer" healthcare system.

In addition to the physician surveys, during the run-up to the 2008 presidential election many medical organizations expressed their opinions about potential U.S. healthcare reform. The American Medical Association (AMA) endorsed "a clear role for government in financing and regulating health-insurance coverage, with health plans and healthcare services being provided through private markets" (AMA 2008). Moreover, the AMA argued that those who are unable to pay their premiums should qualify for government subsidies. The AMA also supported the maintenance of government programs such as Medicare and Medicaid, and ensuring that reimbursements from these programs are adequate (AMA 2009). Our survey did not provide a healthcare modification option to match the AMA proposal. Although it is difficult to define the AMA proposal based on only one option from our survey question that asks about healthcare reform options, perhaps the AMA proposal can be classified as a combination of "expansion

**Table 4: Modification to Healthcare System Based on Support for President (data expressed as number (%), N=204)**

	Support in the 2008 U.S. Election			Total
	McCain	Obama	Other	
Expansion of government coverage	6 (2.9)	9 (4.4)	0 (0)	15 (7.3)
Mandate model—Universal healthcare	13 (6.4)	17 (8.3)	0 (0)	30 (14.7)
Multipayer—Universal healthcare	15 (7.3)	65 (31.9)	3 (1.5)	83 (40.7)
Single-payer, government delivery—Universal healthcare	0 (0)	21 (10.3)	0 (0)	21 (10.3)
Single-payer, private delivery—Universal healthcare	3 (1.5)	27 (13.2)	1 (0.5)	31 (15.2)
Tax credits	5 (2.4)	1 (0.5)	0 (0)	6 (2.9)
No modification is necessary	2 (1.0)	0 (0)	1 (0.5)	3 (1.5)
No opinion	4 (2.0)	10 (4.9)	1 (0.5)	15 (7.4)

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of government coverage" and "tax credits" as defined in our survey. Neither of these options received broad support among our survey respondents.

Two other major voices of physician and medical student opinions about healthcare are the American Medical Students Association (AMSA) and Physicians for a National Health Plan (PNHP). Both organizations support a single-payer healthcare system funded by the federal government with private healthcare delivery. (AMSA 2009; Woolhandler et al. 2003). Only 15.2% of our respondents chose this plan as their preferred modification to the U.S. healthcare system. Nonetheless, over 80% (167/204) of our respondents felt it was the government's responsibility to ensure basic healthcare for its citizens, which is clearly in line with the viewpoints of AMSA and PNHP.

This study does have limitations. First, we surveyed only first- and second-year medical students. Third- and fourth-year medical students might have different opinions about U.S. healthcare after rotating through hospitals. However, we restricted our survey to first- and second-year medical students because we wanted to evaluate medical students' opinions before the students were fully immersed in patient care. These students might be free of biases associated with different hospitals and doctors with whom they come into contact. Second, as we surveyed only Einstein students, of whom nearly three-quarters are self-reported Democrats, there may be selection bias. Nevertheless, Einstein students represent a diverse student body, coming from 27 different states. Third, our study may have response bias such as having a higher percentage of responses from those with an interest in public-health policy or with strong political leanings.

CONCLUSIONS

One aspect of our study that is unambiguous is the strong desire of Einstein medical students to receive more education in medical school about the U.S. healthcare system. Comprehensive education about the system would better prepare medical students to provide a higher standard of healthcare and a wider variety of healthcare options to patients, especially those who are uninsured or underinsured. Medical school curricula primarily focus on teaching students clinical medicine knowledge. In order to supplement this clinical knowledge, some students obtain master's degrees in public health in order to incorporate health policy into their medical careers. However, focusing on health policy in medical school curricula would reach all medical students and would highlight political, economic, and social policies that are an integral part of physicians' careers.

Our survey demonstrates considerable medical student support for some form of universal healthcare

in the United States, with a multipayer system of government and insurance company collaboration as the most popular reform. It is evident that students also feel that more-comprehensive education about the U.S. healthcare system is necessary in medical school curricula. Additionally, although many previous public figures have attempted to spearhead healthcare reform, there is vigorous optimism that, with Barack Obama as president, the number of uninsured U.S. citizens will decrease, albeit at a high monetary cost. By surveying and seeking the opinions of medical students, policy-makers can learn which healthcare reforms would be most amenable to future physicians. Most importantly, over the next four years, medical students can join with physicians and political leaders to improve the state of healthcare in the United States.

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Appendix: 2009 Einstein Medical Student Survey

What is your gender?

Female  Male

- What is your top future career specialty choice?
  - Internal Medicine – Primary Care
  - Pediatrics – Primary Care
  - Family Medicine
  - Surgery
- Obstetrics/Gynecology
- Psychiatry
- Subspecialty (of internal medicine or pediatrics)
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Undecided

Please rank what you feel are the 3 most important issues facing the United States of America (US) today (1, 2, 3; with 1 being most important).

- \_\_\_ Economy and Jobs
- \_\_\_ Education
- \_\_\_ Energy Policy
- \_\_\_ Environment
- \_\_\_ Immigration
- \_\_\_ Healthcare
- \_\_\_ Terrorism and National Security
- \_\_\_ War in Afghanistan
- \_\_\_ War in Iraq
- \_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Which of these views do you think best describes the US healthcare system today – it is in a state of crisis, it has major flaws, it has minor flaws, or it has no flaws?

- Crisis
- Major flaws
- Minor flaws
- No flaws
- No opinion

Please rank what you feel are the 3 most important issues facing the US healthcare system today? (1, 2, 3; with 1 being most important)

- \_\_\_ That many people do not have access to healthcare
- \_\_\_ The quality of healthcare is poor
- \_\_\_ The cost of healthcare is too high
- \_\_\_ Technology is overused
- \_\_\_ Technology is underused
- \_\_\_ There is a shortage of primary care
- \_\_\_ Few preventative care services and education
- \_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Overall, how do you currently rate healthcare COVERAGE in the US?

- Excellent
- Good  Fair  Poor  No opinion

Do you think it is the responsibility of the US government to ensure that all of its citizens have basic healthcare coverage, or is that not the responsibility of the US government?

- Yes, government is responsible
- No, government is not responsible
- No opinion

Which of the following modifications to the healthcare system in the US would you most prefer?

- Expansion of government coverage: government-sponsored healthcare programs (Medicaid, etc.) expand eligibility and government increases regulation of private-insurance market.
- Mandate model - Universal healthcare: all citizens have to buy health insurance, and those who cannot afford it get subsidies to buy private or government health plans.
- Multi-payer - Universal healthcare: all citizens have access to basic healthcare paid by the government, but can choose to buy private insurance.
- Single-payer, government delivery - Universal healthcare: government pays for healthcare of entire population, and delivery of care is government-run.
- Single-payer, private delivery - Universal healthcare: government pays for healthcare of entire population, and delivery of care remains mostly private.
- Tax credits: replace current tax exemption for employer-provided insurance with tax credits for individuals and families while maintaining current insurance system.
- No modification is necessary: current system of a variety of private insurance plans.
- No opinion.

What is your view of the US healthcare system today as compared to the healthcare systems of other industrialized nations?

	Better	Same	Worse	Do not know
Access to care for everyone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Freedom of choice of physician for patients	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Waiting time for medical treatments	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
High-quality care	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Medical technology development	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Prevention of disease	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

At this point in your medical education, do you feel your medical school has adequately taught you about the US healthcare system?

- Yes  No  No opinion

Please indicate the level of influence that the following sources of information have had on shaping your opinion about the US healthcare system.

	Strongly influenced	Minimally influenced	Did not Influenced
Peers in medical school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Faculty in medical school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Required medical school coursework	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Extracurricular activities in medical school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Personal/family experiences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Media	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Did you vote in the 2008 US presidential election?

- Yes
- No
- I am not legally allowed to vote (e.g., not US citizen)

Whether or not you actually voted in the 2008 presidential election, whom did you support in the 2008 US presidential election?

- John McCain  Barack Obama  Other

With which United States political party do you most identify?

- Democrat  Republican  Other  None

What do you think will happen to the number of uninsured US citizens in the next 4 years with Barack Obama as president?

- Appreciable increase in the number of uninsured US citizens
- Appreciable decrease in the number of uninsured US citizens
- No change

What do you think will happen to the total amount of money spent on healthcare in the US in the next 4 years with Barack Obama as president?

- Appreciable increase in the total amount of money spent on healthcare in the US
- Appreciable decrease in the total amount of money spent on healthcare in the US
- No change