

Manufacturers Seek Flexible Health Care Options to Reduce Costs







SHAPING UP:

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Health care spending continues to be one of the top issues for manufacturers and small businesses. Insurance premiums have risen for many firms, and provisions of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) have exacerbated such increases for some businesses, particularly small and medium-sized entities. Despite such frustrations with pricing pressures, manufacturers see the benefits of offering health care options to their employees. In the most recent survey from the Kaiser Family Foundation, 92 percent of workers in the sector were eligible to participate in their company's health benefits, the highest of any industry. Of those individuals who were eligible, the take-up rate was 83 percent.

With that in mind, manufacturers continue to seek flexible health care options to reduce their costs. Manufacturing businesses recognize that providing health care coverage is a necessity for

them to remain competitive in attracting talent and maintaining a healthy, stable workforce. For example, when asked about how they might react to increasing costs for offering health care in a recent National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) survey, only 1.6 percent planned to stop providing coverage.² Instead, manufacturers have been forced to switch plans in some cases and/or increase copays and deductibles as well as raise the share of premiums paid by employees to keep costs down.

This paper focuses on recent trends regarding health care costs and highlights a number of policy priorities for manufacturers, including their desire to lower costs, increase the overall number of options available and ensure they and their employees are well informed when making important health care decisions.

¹ Kaiser Family Foundation (2014), Exhibit 3.2, p. 59.

² Moutray (2014).

Costs of Health Care

Health Care Expenditures

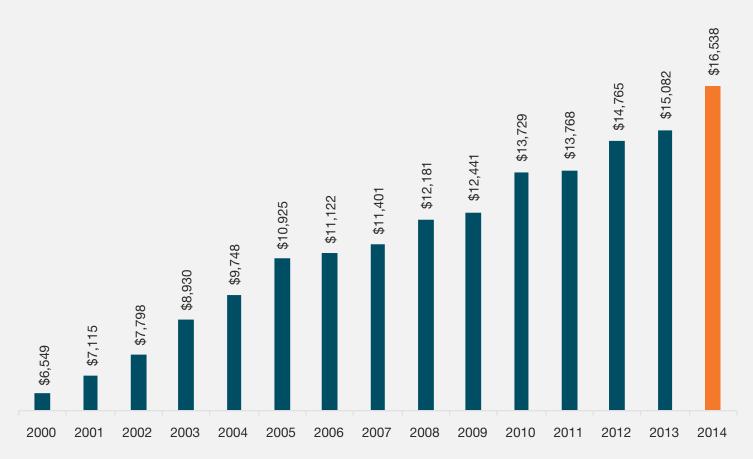
In the most recent NAM Manufacturers' Outlook Survey, 74.1 percent of respondents mentioned health insurance expenses as their top business challenge. Since being added to the survey two years ago, it has been listed as a primary concern each quarter. Respondents anticipated premiums to increase 7.9 percent on average over the next 12 months. Just more than 74 percent of manufacturers noted increases of 5 percent or more, with one-third reporting gains of at least 10 percent. As one might expect, this varied widely by firm size. The average premium increase for large manufacturers was 6.8 percent, which was lower than the 8.5 percent average growth rate anticipated for small and medium-sized manufacturing businesses.

Health insurance premiums have increased steadily for more than a decade. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, the average annual cost for a family plan in the manufacturing sector in 2000 was \$6,549. That figure was \$10,925 by 2005, and in 2014, it had risen another 51.4 percent to \$16,538 (Figure 1).³ While the analysis found that the average family

premium increased just 3.0 percent in 2014,⁴ the increases for manufacturing were more significant (up 9.7 percent between 2013 and 2014).

Interestingly, the data have followed a stair-step pattern over the past 10 years. For instance, family health insurance premiums in the manufacturing sector jumped 12.1 percent in 2005 to \$10,925 annually. This was followed by two years of more modest growth, or 1.8 percent and 2.5 percent, respectively, in 2006 and 2007. Then, there were more significant increases in 2008 (up 6.8 percent), 2010 (up 10.4 percent), 2012 (up 7.2 percent) and 2014 (up 9.7 percent). In the intervening years, those large gains were sustained with smaller gains: 2009 (up 2.1 percent), 2011 (up 0.3 percent) and 2013 (up 2.2 percent). While it is not clear why this is the case, it might suggest a more modest gain for health premiums in 2015 before rising more sharply in 2016—assuming this pattern holds. Still, if premiums increase by 7.9 percent, as suggested by the NAM Manufacturers' Outlook Survey discussed above, that would imply an average annual cost for a family plan of \$17,845.

Figure 1: Average Annual Cost of a Family Health Insurance Plan in the Manufacturing Sector, 2000–2014



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation

³ Kaiser Family Foundation (2014), Exhibit 1.4, p. 26. Data for previous years were taken from each year's annual report. While year-to-year comparisons are not perfect, the underlying direction is pretty clear.

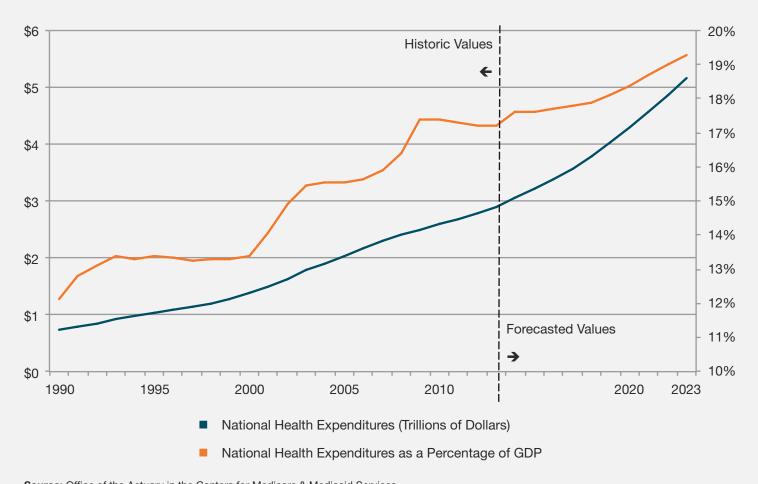
⁴ *Ibid*, p. 1.

Much has been made about the fact that health expenditures have slowed, with some analysts and politicians suggesting that the United States has begun to "bend the cost curve" for health care expenditures. Advocates of the ACA, for instance, are quick to attribute slower health expenditures to its enactment, including in President Obama's State of the Union remarks. With health care expenditures comprising an ever-larger proportion of the federal budget (and the U.S. economy), a slower rate of health care inflation would be welcome news—something long sought by policymakers.

Yet, it might be too early to claim victory. Slower health care inflation could be a temporary phenomenon, rendering

statements about a bended cost curve premature. As was stated by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' (CMS) chief actuary, much of the slower pace could be attributed to the recession and the sluggish pace of the economic recovery to date. It is not a coincidence that health care expenditures have been slower since 2008. According to a recent *Health Affairs* journal article, this pattern is also not unique. The authors write, "Growth in health spending and GDP have tended to converge several years after the end of economic recessions; as a result, the health spending share of GDP stabilizes at those times." Put simply, it slows when the economy and labor market weaken, but then rises again when the economy improves.

Figure 2: National Health Expenditures, 1990–2023



Source: Office of the Actuary in the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services

Other studies also point to cyclical factors as the main driver of slower health care expenditure growth. For instance, one analysis found that 70 percent of the slowdown in health spending growth was attributable to the economy.⁷ However, it would be unfair to say that structural changes have had no effect. While the bulk of

the recent deceleration in costs can be traced to the economy, research has also found that attempts to control costs have had some positive impacts, particularly with changes in health care delivery and increased cost sharing, some of which would have little to do with the passage and enactment of federal legislation.

⁵ See https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/remarks-president-state-union-address-january-20-2015.

⁶ Hartman et al. (2014).

Dranove, Garthwaite and Ody (2014).

⁸ Levitt et al. (2013).

Nonetheless, the longer-term trend suggests that expenditures will again start to pick up soon. Indeed, total national health expenditures accounted for 17.2 percent of GDP in 2013, up from 12.1 percent in 1990 and 13.4 percent in 2000 (Figure 2), according to the Office of the Actuary in the CMS. In 2014, this share is predicted to rise to 17.6 percent, with continued gains pushing health spending to 19.3 percent of GDP by 2023. National health expenditures should increase from \$2.9 trillion in 2013 to \$5.2 trillion in 2023, a 78.2 percent increase. Demographics play a role here, as more baby boomers enter retirement. In addition, Census Bureau data suggest that health care expenditures have already begun to climb, increasing 7.3 percent in the first quarter of 2015.9

Higher health expenditures largely explain why our annual budget deficits are expected to rise again by the end of the decade, according to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), despite recent progress on that front.¹⁰

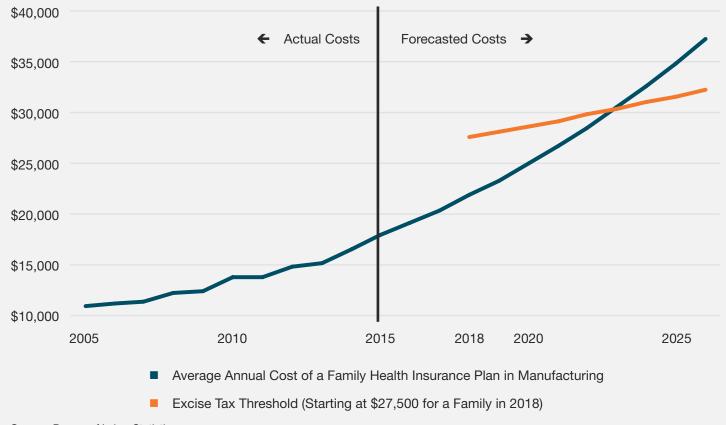
Employer-Based Coverage

The ACA changes to the health coverage landscape highlight

some issues to watch across the next several years. First, the CBO anticipates that the number of uninsured nonelderly individuals will drop from an estimated 42 million in 2014 to 29 million in 2019. This would reflect an increase in the percentage of insured from 84 percent to 90 percent over that time frame. However, the second issue it raises is how the changes will impact employer-based coverage. The CBO predicts that 10 million Americans could lose their offer of employer-based coverage by 2021, with many forced to purchase insurance on the exchanges. The percentage of Americans younger than 65 years old with employer-provided health insurance dropped from 59.2 percent in 2009 to 57.1 percent in 2013—a trend that many, including the CBO, expect to accelerate in the years ahead. 12

Beyond these costs, another health issue prompting anxieties is the impending employee benefits tax, also known as the "Cadillac" tax, which goes into effect in 2018. Employers will have to pay a 40 percent surcharge on benefits that exceed \$27,500 for a family or \$10,200 for an individual. Towers Watson has estimated that this tax might hit 48 percent of businesses in 2018, or 82 percent by 2023.¹³

Figure 3: Actual and Forecasted Health Insurance Costs for Manufacturing, 2005–2025



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

⁹ Altman (2015).

¹⁰ CBO (2015b), Table 1, p. 2.

¹¹ CBO (2015a), Table B-2, p. 119.

¹³ Towers Watson (2014).

The manufacturing sector, in particular, will be hit hard by the tax. In 2014, as noted above, the average annual cost of a health insurance plan for employees in the manufacturing sector was \$16,538, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. If these costs increase by 7.9 percent in 2015 as suggested by the recent NAM Manufacturers' Outlook Survey, premiums would be \$17,845 in 2015. These costs have increased 6.9 percent since 2000, and if we assume a similar pace over the next decade, the average annual cost of a family health insurance plan could reach \$34,776 by 2025. If you overlay that estimate with the employee benefits excise tax, the typical manufacturer would need to start paying this tax by 2024, if not sooner. This estimate assumes 2 percent inflation. As such, the excise tax would rise from \$27,500 in 2018 to \$32,221 in 2025. Left in place, this tax would affect nearly every employee benefits package in the manufacturing sector over the next decade.

The CBO originally calculated that excise taxes from these high-premium insurance plans will total \$149 billion between 2018 and 2025. 14 Of course, this assumes that firms continue to provide the same amount of coverage. Many will likely opt to reduce the value of their benefits to avoid paying the tax. As a result, the CBO lowered its estimate over that time frame to \$87 billion, or 41.6 percent less. 15 Either way, it is something that may impact many manufacturers and their employees.

Medical Device Excise Tax

Designed to help offset the cost of the ACA, the medical device excise tax is levied on the gross sales of medical device manufacturers. The 2.3 percent tax applies to all medical devices, ranging from surgical gloves to prosthetics and imaging equipment. Since its implementation in January 2013, the tax has increased the effective tax rate for U.S. medical device manufacturers to 27.6 percent compared to the OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] average of 16.5 percent. Furthermore, the tax is estimated to collect \$30 billion over 10 years, resulting in the overall tax burden on the industry to increase by more than one-third. 16

In a recent survey of its membership, the Advanced Medical Technology Association (AdvaMed) found that nearly two-thirds of participants had decided to slow or stop hiring as a result of the tax. The industry reported employment reductions of 14,000

workers in 2013, followed by 4,500 jobs lost in 2014. In addition, AdvaMed estimates the medical device industry will forgo the creation of nearly 20,500 American jobs as a result of the tax.¹⁷

The United States holds 40 percent of the global medical device market, exporting some \$33 billion in devices each year. To maintain their leadership position, manufacturers must drive innovation. The medical device tax, which is imposed on revenues rather than profits, discourages research and development, particularly in an industry comprised mostly of small and medium-sized companies. Indeed, 80 percent of companies in the industry have 50 or fewer employees, and only 2 percent have more than 500 employees. Due to rigorous testing and trial periods, some innovative and dynamic products are not immediately profitable, a significant challenge for smaller companies.

Medical Liability Reform

The cost of providing health coverage to employees is one of the most significant challenges facing manufacturers today, with health insurance expenses representing the fastest-growing cost component for employers. Medical liability costs play a role in those coverage rates, with the costs of the American legal system being the highest in the world, and medical malpractice alone costing in excess of \$55.6 billion annually.²⁰ Those costs can be considerably higher if you examine indirect costs, particularly "defensive medicine," or the increased use of tests and procedures by providers to protect against future lawsuits, which researchers at Harvard University found not only contribute to inefficiencies in the health care system, but also fail to prevent medical errors and avoidable patient injuries.²¹ The costs of defensive medicine are estimated to be higher than both direct costs and medical malpractice insurance premiums combined.²²

Rising health insurance costs hinder manufacturers' ability to compete globally, drain resources that could be invested in new technologies and facilities, inhibit the creation of new jobs and undermine economic growth across the nation. Previous legislative proposals have estimated savings of both direct and indirect medical liability costs up to \$20 billion through 2023.²³ Legal reform must be pursued at the state and federal level to rein in these growing health care costs, restore balance to the system and discourage frivolous claims.

¹⁴ CBO (2015a), Table B-2, p. 119.

¹⁵ CBO (2015b), Table A-1, p. 16.

¹⁶ AdvaMed (2015).

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⁸ AdvaMed (2012).

¹⁹ Berardi (2012).

²⁰ Mello et al. (2010).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Webel, Chu and Sarata (2012).

²³ Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget (2013).

Policy Objectives

In the quarterly and annual surveys the NAM has conducted in past years, there are three primary interests manufacturers have expressed regarding health care policy: controlling costs, expanding coverage options and accessing better information.

Controlling Costs

Manufacturers are extremely attuned and sensitive to cost inputs. The cost of health care coverage has historically been difficult to predict with any real certainty. These realities cause manufacturers to consistently cite controlling health care costs as their highest priority when discussing objectives in health care policy space. While the overall spend on health care services and products may have slowed in recent years, the primary sensitivity employers have in relation to the health care market has been the cost of insurance coverage, which has continued to increase at rates much higher than general inflation, even when the growth rate of health care spending slows.

The causes of upward pressure in health insurance premiums can vary significantly from plan to plan, but the primary causes of insurance premium increases can be tied to utilization; payment rates for providers; adoption of new technology, services and products; structural coverage and benefit changes either initiated by the employer or the result of regulatory or statutory changes required by the state and/or federal government; and additional taxes, fees and administrative burdens placed on employers and health plans.

The ACA made significant changes to both the individual and group health insurance markets. While much of the focus recently has been on health care exchanges and the individual market, the employer-sponsored market has absorbed most of the new requirements in coverage and benefits contained in the law, with a few very notable and potentially costly exceptions.

As mentioned in the economic analysis above, the employee benefits tax, medical device tax, reinsurance fees, Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) fees and additional reporting and administrative requirements all add to the current cost of insurance coverage and will place upward pressure on insurance coverage rates well into the future. None of these additional costs will result in a patient seeing a doctor, filling a prescription or any actual health care at all—it is simply additional costs on the system that employers and employees signing up for coverage will have to pay. In fact, the NAM has estimated that the additional fees, taxes and administrative burdens on manufacturers alone will cost \$22.2 billion over the next three years.²⁴

In an effort to address the actual cost of providing coverage, the NAM supports legislative efforts to eliminate the medical device tax and the employee benefits tax and mitigate the burden of reporting requirements placed on employers under the law. These simple actions by Congress could lower the cost of employer-based coverage by billions of dollars in the next 5 to 10 years alone.

Employers are also looking at ways to increase the prevalence and effectiveness of wellness programs, which have the potential to address utilization rates over the long term by keeping individuals healthier longer and later in life. Restrictions or conflicting messages from regulators and policymakers will make wellness programs less useful as a tool to incentivize healthful living and lower the potential cost savings for employees and employers. The NAM supports efforts to strengthen and improve the proper incentives to create and innovate in the delivery of wellness programs.

The NAM also supports the modernization of the approval processes for medical devices, pharmaceuticals and biologics. Efforts underway in Congress, such as the 21st Century Cures initiative, are important contributions to addressing the cost of developing, testing and approving medical innovations both in terms of financial resources and quality of treatment. If Congress and regulators can agree on ways to reduce the cost of getting treatments from the laboratory to the patient without sacrificing safety, it would be to everyone's benefit.

Expanding Coverage Options

Employers continually look for more effective and efficient ways to deliver services and products to the markets they serve. Health care coverage should be no different, and employers will actively seek out ways to ensure the coverage they provide is competitive and centered on delivering health care in the most cost-effective way possible. Manufacturers have invested a significant amount of resources in trying to maintain a healthy workforce, and NAM members offer health insurance coverage at a much higher rate than other industries. In fact, recent surveys show that 97 percent of NAM members offer health coverage to their employees. Many manufacturers also provide access to on-site clinics for primary care as well as on-site pharmacies that will deliver medications directly to employees—such arrangements have demonstrated some results in short- and long-term savings for employers and employees.

The health care coverage that employers offer has evolved over the years, and it is reasonable to assume it will continue to do so in the future. However, there is some added uncertainty about the impact the ACA will have on employer-sponsored coverage. Some estimate the ACA will not affect the employer market at all, and still others believe there will be a near total collapse of the employer-based coverage system, with 90 percent of employers discontinuing health insurance to their employees. It is difficult to predict exactly what will occur, but the NAM believes there is likely to be a decline in the number of employers providing coverage over time, and most of the decline will occur in the small-group market. Eventually, there could be some erosion in the number of medium to large employer markets, but that will be in the 10- to 20-year time frame.

In the short term, the NAM believes Congress and the Obama Administration should take steps to provide more flexibility and increase the options available to employers that would like to

²⁴ Trauger (2014).

continue providing coverage or assisting their employees in paying for health coverage. For example, allowing and easing access to defined-contribution models and hybrid ownership of plans are approaches that would encourage employers to contribute to the cost of insuring their employees at an amount that is sustainable for the employer and predictable for the employee.

Direct primary care also gives employers and employees another coverage option to consider. Under this model, employees would have access to primary care for a monthly, quarterly or annual fee that would cover all or most of the primary care services needed, and a high-deductible insurance product would cover emergencies and major medical procedures and hospitalizations. This model is in practice across the country and has shown to reduce costs by roughly 20 percent. While this approach is showing promise, it is not allowed to be paired with a health savings account due to a ruling by the Internal Revenue Service deeming direct primary care an "insurance plan," despite several states statutorily classifying them as not an insurance product. The NAM supports legislation to recognize direct primary care for what it is—the purchase of health care services—and allow these arrangements to be paired with a health savings account.

Other models Congress and the Obama Administration should consider allowing or encouraging are private health care exchanges, ERISA [Employee Retirement Income Security Act] self-insured plans, strengthened health savings accounts and expanded and enhanced flexible spending accounts and health reimbursement arrangements.

Accessing Better Information

Manufacturers measure everything, because they believe that if you can't measure it, you won't improve it. This is also true when it comes to health care, but it is often too difficult to gain access to the information needed to improve the delivery and cost of health care. Addressing issues like the interoperability of systems and access to utilization rates and outcomes are good ways for us as a country to reduce unneeded tests and procedures that will lower the cost of coverage in the long run. Access to better and clearer information will also assist employers and employees in seeking out the best value in health care rather than the volume of services provided. The NAM supports commonsense approaches to increasing transparency and availability of information in health care to assist all parties in making the best decisions about when, how and where they will access the health care system in the United States.

Conclusion

Health care spending continues to be one of the top concerns for manufacturers, and recent increases in health insurance premiums for most firms have deepened the frustration. Increases in premiums stand in contrast to a general slowdown in health expenditures in the years since the recession of 2007–2008. While much has been made about the slowing of overall expenditures, it is not a unique situation as expenditures have historically declined during, and for some time after, an economic downturn. While the bulk of the recent deceleration in spending can be attributed to economic conditions, research has found that attempts to control costs have had some positive impacts, particularly with changes in the delivery of care and increased cost sharing. Despite the recent slowdown in spending, the longer-term trends suggest expenditures will begin to pick up steam soon and push health spending to 19.3 percent of GDP by 2023.

Manufacturers have three primary objectives when thinking about health care policy. They are interested in controlling costs, expanding coverage options and accessing better information. Policies such as eliminating the employee benefits tax, medical device tax, reinsurance fees, health insurance tax and PCORI fees would all alleviate some of the upward pressure manufacturers see in health premiums every year. Just as manufacturers continually seek to improve their processes and products, health policies should encourage flexibility and allow for new innovations in coverage options rather than lock in one model. Federal law should not hinder the creation and adoption of new methods of delivering the products and services that meet the needs of the market. Controlling costs and providing flexibility also require better information to make better choices. Manufacturers support commonsense approaches to increasing both the quantity and quality of information available to consumers and payers to make the best decisions possible about the coverage and services they purchase.

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