

THE COASTAL

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## NUMBER OF UNINSURED ON THE RISE



BILL WECHTER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Vista Community Clinic pharmacy technician Cuc Nguyen works Wednesday with donated drugs that are distributed to patients with few financial resources through the Pharmacy Assistance Program.

# HEALTHY DOSE OF HELP

## Clinics lend a hand with some residents' pricey prescriptions

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STAFF WRITER

**NORTH COUNTY** — Marilyn Burr has known for years something that might interest many North County residents who have recently lost their jobs: If you're uninsured and not making much money, you can get your meds for free.

Burr, 64, is a diabetic who works part time as a greeter at a local Wal-

Mart. She said she gets free insulin through Vista Community Clinic's Pharmacy Assistance Program. That prescription, she said, would cost \$300 a month if she paid for it on her own.

"I have very high blood sugar, and I would have to just go without if I didn't have the help," Burr said.

Officials at North County's largest medical clinics say they are seeing an uptick in the number of patients who have lost health insurance for the

first time. The National Coalition on Healthcare estimated that in 2007, there were nearly 46 million Americans without health insurance who were not old enough to qualify for Medicare — an increase of almost 10 percent since 2000. (Figures for 2008 were not yet available.)

Dr. Kevin Ellis, medical director at North County Health Services, said that the organization has about five

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different prescription programs available to help uninsured individuals and families get medication at low or no cost. The nonprofit operates nine clinics throughout the region.

"When we tell them about it, many of them are just amazed," Ellis said. "When we tell them, 'You can go downstairs and get that Lipitor for only a few dollars,' they say that 'My co-pay under my old insurance for that same drug was \$25. How can this be cheaper?'"

Irene Torres, pharmacy manager at Vista Community Clinic, said that with more than 1,000 drug companies participating in assistance programs, her office can usually find what a patient needs. In addition, drug companies will usually mail the supplies directly to a patient's home, she said.

"I don't think we've found anything you can't help them with," Torres said.

A new national tracking study, released in late January by a nonprofit think tank called the Center for Studying Healthcare System Change, estimates that 1 in 7 people cannot afford to fill needed prescriptions. That number, according to the center, was 1 in 10 in 2003.

The change represents a 35 percent increase, the study states, in the number of prescriptions going unfilled.

For about a decade, drug companies have given away some medicines to low-income families and individuals, but only with the direct involvement of a doctor.

Torres explained that each company has its own financial guidelines and forms that must be filled out and mailed in. She said that drug companies usually require that patients not have insurance and also be able to prove their income, usually using the most recent income tax return. Pa-

tients without Social Security numbers and homeless residents without tax returns or addresses, are generally not eligible, she said.

Torres said the Advair inhaler — list price \$158 — is one of the most commonly requested drugs among asthmatic clinic patients. She said the drug's maker, giant GlaxoSmithKline, will provide a voucher for the drug for a patient in a family of four that makes up to \$53,000 per year and is uninsured.

"You don't have to be unemployed," she said. "You just have to be without insurance and at a certain income level for your family size."

She added that the clinic does what it can to make sure that patients are telling the truth when they say they do not have private insurance and are not on a government program such as Medicare or Medi-Cal.

"We can't just take their word for it. We don't want to ruin the program (because) it's helping so many people,"

she said.

Patients don't necessarily have to visit a clinic to see whether they would qualify for a free-prescription program. A wealth of such information exists on the Internet.

One site in particular, patientassistance.com, maintains a database of more than 1,000 drug names. Click on a name, and the site takes visitors to information on income guidelines and application forms.

Rex Bowden, the not-for-profit site's executive director, said that keeping patients on maintenance medications such as insulin and asthma inhalers can have lasting effects on community hospitals.

"If a diabetic does not get their insulin, they end up in the emergency room. If they're uninsured, then everybody pays," he said.

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