

Punishing babies is not immigration reform

by *By The San Diego Union-Tribune*

In the world of politics, there are bad ideas and then there are ideas that are just plain dreadful.

It's in that second column that one finds a new federal policy change regarding Medicaid that would make it more difficult for the U.S.-born infants of illegal immigrants - infants who are, according to the Constitution, U.S. citizens - to obtain health care in the critical first year of their lives.

Illegal immigrants are prohibited from using Medicaid, but that doesn't apply to their U.S.-born children. And even under current law, illegal immigrants themselves can get treatment for emergency medical conditions, and that includes labor and delivery.

Now for the change. It used to be that, once a woman received care under Medicaid for the birth of a baby, the child was automatically covered for up to one year from his date of birth. But under a new policy dictating that anyone who gets Medicaid for non-emergency services must first show documentation of U.S. citizenship, the coverage of these infants has been thrown into question. Even though the question of citizenship isn't in doubt - because these children were born in the United States - parents must now show documents to prove that their child is eligible for treatment. The medical care at issue might include the standard immunizations that are so important during a baby's first year.

Doctors and hospital administrators are afraid that, as a result of the new policy, illegal immigrants may be reluctant to demand the treatment and provide a child's birth certificate because of a fear of deportation. As a result, children may fall through the cracks and not get medical coverage.

And for what grand purpose is this happening? It's so some politician can go back to his constituents, beat his chest and talk about how he got tough on illegal immigration. In this case, the politician is Rep. Charlie Norwood, R-Ga., who was the driving force behind the Deficit Reduction Act, the federal law that imposed the documentation requirement on Medicaid.

By the way, don't ask us what making it more difficult for infants to get Medicaid coverage has to do with reducing the deficit, especially since a spokesman for Norwood insists that there should be no problem at all with newborns because they have the documents necessary to get the coverage.

But if that's true, then why impose this requirement at all?

We get it. People like Norwood are opposed to illegal immigration and they resent that the U.S.-born children of illegal immigrants are U.S. citizens with rights and privileges. The outrage is duly noted.

But, on the road to reform, our representatives should at least avoid detours that take a bad situation and make it worse by doing things such as punishing innocent babies for the sins of their parents.

This is a heartless and poorly conceived policy change that might well wind up costing more than it saves. After all, isn't it better and smarter to spend pennies in preventive care early in a child's life than to pay dollars later?

That's a simple concept that should make sense to just about anyone - well, anyone who doesn't have to stand for re-election and feels they need to appeal to our baser instincts to win.

Reprinted from The San Diego Union-Tribune.

Punishing babies is not immigration reform by By The San Diego Union-Tribune