

**POSTER ABSTRACTS**  
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**Data Issues**  
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**HMO Membership Patterns: Patient Characteristics, and Implications  
for Benefit Structures and Resource Utilization**

Mary Price, MA - Kaiser Division of Research  
Richard Brand, PhD - University of California, San Francisco  
Tom Ray, MBA - Kaiser Division of Research  
Bruce Fireman, MA - Kaiser Division of Research  
Joseph Selby, MD, MPH - Kaiser Division of Research  
John Hsu, MD, MBA - Kaiser Division of Research

**Background:** Population based studies on health maintenance organization (HMO) members often require decisions about the treatment of short-term gaps in membership enrollment. This study examines the frequency of these enrollment gaps, and investigates the patient and resource utilization characteristics associated with gaps of six months or less.

**Methods:** In a retrospective cohort study using automated databases from January 1999 to December 2000, we compared members with 24 months of continuous enrollment to members with a single membership gap of one to six months. Eligible subjects were members of the Kaiser Permanente Northern California (KPNC) health plan both at the beginning and at the end of the study period, were greater than one year of age on January 1, 1999, and had commercial or Medicare insurance. This cohort is a subset of a larger study on the impacts of cost-sharing.

**Results:** There were 2,196,729 eligible subjects during the study period. In this group, 168,729 (8%) had at least one gap in membership - the majority (67.7%) had a single gap of six months or less. On average, subjects with any gap were younger than continuously enrolled subjects (28.7 v. 38.6,  $p < 0.01$ ). In the group with a single membership gap, subjects were more likely than not to have a change in coverage or benefit structure when the duration was for two months or greater. Moreover, 23% of subjects had at least one medical visit during their membership gap. When enrolled, subjects had a mean number of 39.6 visits / month / 100 patients; when not enrolled, this rate decreased from 35.2 (1 month) to 10.2 (6 months).

**Conclusion:** The preliminary data suggest that membership in this sample was relatively stable, with few members having a gap in enrollment. These gaps, however, were associated with both changes in coverage, and with considerable resource use. Further research is necessary to understand the tradeoffs implicit in any decision about membership enrollment.