

NASHVILLE POST OP-ED: CURING MEDICINE'S PROBLEMS

Curing medicine's problems

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By U.S. Rep. Jim Cooper

This summer could be one of the most important in American history. Every modern U.S. President has tried to make the care provided by doctors and hospitals more affordable to patients, but all have failed. Health care costs continue to skyrocket, hurting America's families. President Barack Obama is trying to make care affordable, but he will need our help.

Many people like the current medical system because they have enough money and are satisfied with the quality of care they are getting. Reformers should respect these lucky people. But tens of millions more people have no health insurance, have substandard coverage, or are about to lose their insurance.

The best doctors tell us that we should be worried about the quality of our care because as many as 98,000 Americans die prematurely every year due to preventable medical errors. That's the equivalent of a jumbo jet crashing almost every day. We would never allow this situation in aviation, so why in health care?

There are ways to fix the problems in our system. For example, under pressure from the White House, health insurance companies agreed two weeks ago to drastically simplify the paperwork that ties up our physicians and nurses. That's good news, but it's also about 30 years late.

Another example of sensible reform is the recent programs by Wal-Mart, Kroger and others to sell many prescription medicines for \$4. Think how many years we paid much higher prices for the same medicines! But once large companies bargained with the drug companies for lower prices, we benefited. And these companies are still making good money at \$4!

Our medical system is so crazy that similar towns in the same state can spend twice as much on health care without any health benefits. Read the recent New Yorker article by Dr. Atul Gawande, a former staffer of mine, to find out the bizarre things happening in states like Texas.

We will hear a lot of overheated rhetoric this summer, but the only opinion that matters is yours. I hope you will tune in to the debate and decide for yourself who's right. There will be \$2.4 trillion of vested interests in health care trying to persuade us to do nothing because everything is fine. And there will be folks like me, and Nancy-Ann DeParle (a Tennessean who is now leading the White House reform effort), trying to cure the problems in today's system without harming the good.

This may look like an impossible task except for the fact that we are probably wasting \$700 billion a year in health care. Those dollars can be put to much better use to help everyone get better health care. If you don't believe me, look what the major health industries told President Obama a month ago: that they could come up with \$2 trillion in savings without harming anyone. It's time to make them practice what they preach.

Jim Cooper is the Congressman for Tennessee's Fifth District. He serves on the Armed Services, Budget, and Oversight and Government Reform committees.

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