

Overhauling our Healthcare System

Our healthcare system is sick. For too long we have ignored the symptoms or simply applied bandaids solutions. We need comprehensive national healthcare reform now.

Almost 50 million Americans lack any health insurance, and many more do not have sufficient coverage to protect themselves and their families. With rising unemployment in this severe recession, more people are losing their health insurance when they lose their jobs.

Virtually every other country in the developed world provides universal access to healthcare. They treat healthcare as a basic human right.

We also spend far more on healthcare than other countries. We spend 15% of our GDP -- an average of \$6,000 per person per year -- on healthcare costs. Japan, Germany, France, Great Britain, and Canada all spend less than \$3,300 per person.

Perhaps our higher healthcare costs could be justified if the United States provided significantly better care than these other countries. While it is true that in many cases our healthcare system provides world-class care, we lag behind many other industrialized countries in the overall health of our population. According to the CIA World Factbook, the United States ranks 30th in the world for life expectancy and 45th for infant mortality rate, the two most widely used measures to indicate the level of health in different countries.

President Obama recently stated in a letter to Senator Kennedy and Senator Baucus of Montana, who are leading the effort in Congress to reform our healthcare system, "In 2009, healthcare reform is not a luxury. It's a necessity we cannot defer. Soaring healthcare costs make our current course unsustainable."

Without an overhaul of our healthcare system, it is projected that healthcare will consume 20% of GDP within 10 years, putting an unbearable burden on families, businesses, and government. And millions more Americans will not have access to the care they need.

As the President and Congress tackle healthcare reform, they should be guided by a few basic principles:

1. *Access to healthcare must be universal.* Healthcare should be viewed as a basic human right, not as a luxury that only some people can afford. If you lose your job, you should not also lose your health insurance. As a result of the landmark Healthcare Reform law passed in 2006, Massachusetts is leading the

way forward in providing universal healthcare, with 97% of our population now covered by comprehensive health insurance. Unfortunately, most other states lag far behind.

2. *Healthcare costs must be contained.* Our current healthcare system is enormously inefficient and wasteful. It's estimated that as much as 30 cents out of every healthcare dollar are not spent on direct patient care. This money is consumed by high administrative and overhead costs, and by profits earned by for-profit health insurance companies. These insurance companies spend vast sums of money screening out people with pre-existing conditions, processing claims, and denying care. Healthcare providers are forced to navigate the administrative complexity of many different insurance plans. Furthermore, our current fee-for-service reimbursement system encourages excessive tests and procedures. This payment system does not provide the right incentives to promote patient wellness, along with more efficient and better coordinated delivery of healthcare services.

3. *Quality of care needs to be improved and disparities reduced.* The quality of care that a patient receives varies widely based on income level, race, ethnicity, geography, and other factors. Many people get no primary care, and rely on emergency rooms for treatment, including care for chronic diseases. We need to ensure that all Americans have access to quality care.

4. *Greater focus should be placed on preventive care.* Our current healthcare system directs the vast majority of resources into diagnosis and treatment. Minimal resources are spent on education and prevention. Obesity, in particular, is a huge public health challenge. More than 30% of Americans are obese. Compare this to 14% of Canadians, 9% of the French, and just 3% of Japanese. Encouraging healthier lifestyles through improved health and fitness education in schools, and comprehensive public health campaigns, would reduce rates of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and other illnesses that are very costly to treat.

5. *A public health insurance option needs to be available to all Americans.* Medicare, the public health insurance plan that covers nearly all seniors, provides comprehensive care with administrative costs that consume just 3% of the total budget. A crucial element of healthcare reform is making a Medicare-like nonprofit insurance option available to all Americans, not just seniors. Such a plan would ensure universal access to care while helping to control healthcare costs. It would also enable us to explore the potential for eventually moving to a single-payer healthcare system. A single-payer system, like those in virtually every other industrialized nation, would have enormous advantages in terms of simplicity, efficiency, and cost containment, while providing all Americans the flexibility to choose their preferred doctors and hospitals.

Overhauling our broken healthcare system will not be easy. Vested interests who profit from the current system are mounting a fierce campaign to maintain

the status quo. But, this time, we cannot let them prevail. The price of settling for anything less than a major overhaul will be catastrophic in the years ahead.

I welcome your feedback on healthcare reform or any other issues. Please visit our website at www.RepJasonLewis.com. You can also reach me at 617 722-2060 or by email at Jason.Lewis@state.ma.us.

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