

Health Care Reform Is Going to Save Lives

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The headline of the Journal's editorial "Let This Patient Die a Natural Death" (11/6/09) is tragically appropriate. The editorial opposed the U.S. House health care reform bill that passed, arguing that "Americans can't afford" it.

We at New Mexico Voices for children believe we can't afford not to reform health care — this has truly become a matter of life and death.

A new study by Harvard Medical School has estimated that 45,000 people die every year in this country because they do not have access to health insurance. One American dies every 12 minutes from lack of health insurance! Lack of insurance is now the third leading cause of death among near-elderly adults, right after heart disease and cancer. The study found that uninsured working-age Americans have a 40 percent higher risk of early death than their fellow citizens with insurance.

Another recent study found that 17,000 children died over the past two decades because their families didn't have health insurance. This is disgraceful, and we are the only industrialized country that lets this happen. Many of these adult and child deaths are preventable, if only we have the fortitude and wisdom to act.

At last we have a president and a majority party in Congress, including all of New Mexico's senators and representatives, who are willing to tackle this critical issue. They deserve praise and support, not unfounded criticism. Since New Mexico has the second highest rate of uninsurance in the country, it is certainly appropriate for our congressional delegation to be in the forefront of leadership on health care.

Although Rep. Harry Teague has expressed his support for reform, he voted against this bill.

Enacting health care reform will have big advantages for all of us. The House and Senate bills forbid companies from rescinding coverage when you actually get sick and need it. The bills provide that insurance can't be taken away just because you lose your job, decide to switch jobs or start your own business to improve your family's life. The bills require health insurance companies to offer coverage to all, regardless of pre-existing medical conditions.

It is high time that we required health insurance providers to live up to basic standards that should apply to all businesses supplying a service that vitally affects people's lives.

Contrary to the Journal's position, the nation can afford to do this. The House bill has been found by the independent Congressional Budget Office not only to pay for itself over the next 20 years but even to help reduce the deficit.

One reason is that uninsured individuals today rely on emergency rooms for treatment when medical crises get too big to ignore. This is not only bad for their health (and a cause of preventable deaths), it is expensive and inefficient for the entire health care system. Studies have indicated that American families with insurance pay substantially higher premiums to cover this inefficient care. In fact, insured New Mexicans are some of the hardest hit by higher premiums; our low rate of health insurance costs the average family with insurance \$2,300 more per year!

Health care reform also will help reduce the inefficiency that everyone agrees plagues the Medicare program. Treatment costs vary

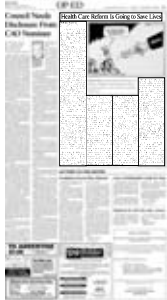
enormously from community to community with no difference in patient outcomes. The House bill will set up a review body that will look at these costs and recommend ways to give the same quality of care across the country at a more reasonable cost — just like the Mayo Clinic already does. It is true that the extra subsidies given to Advantage plans would be eliminated, but without cutting benefits seniors already enjoy. That is why the AARP is fully supporting health care reform.

The House bill helps pay costs by imposing a surtax on individuals making more than \$500,000 per year or couples making more than \$1 million. It is entirely fair to ask these fortunate few to help pay the cost of extending health insurance to the uninsured, most of whom are from low or moderate-income families. This surtax would affect just a fraction of 1 percent of taxpayers, a group whose incomes have skyrocketed and tax burdens have fallen in recent years. It would have only a modest impact on small businesses and no impact at all on 98 percent of taxpayers.

Compared to the moral importance of saving 45,000 lives per year, including many children, the annual costs of the House bill are manageable. N.M. Voices extends its thanks to Rep. Martin Heinrich and Rep. Ben Ray Lujan for supporting this historic bill.

The ball is now in the Senate's court. We are proud that Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall have been national leaders on health care reform. It is time for their colleagues to join them in passing this critically needed legislation and start saving the lives of children and adults in New Mexico and across the country.

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