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Need for New System Is Urgent

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By Rep. John Dingell

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This year's historic election brought great optimism about what Congress, working with a new administration, can accomplish to protect the health of every American.

Health care was a critical issue to voters in November. By overwhelmingly supporting President-elect Barack Obama and strengthening the Democratic majority in Congress, Americans demanded that our dysfunctional health care system be reformed. Not only is such reform essential for the health of our citizens, it's also critical for the global competitiveness of our economy.

There is a clear demand and an urgent need for a new, more effective system. Though we should proceed quickly, we must also do so carefully. To succeed in effectively reforming our health care system, several key principles should be followed.

First, we must seek a path to universal coverage that will provide access for those who do not have it, while protecting the good coverage others currently enjoy. I have a long history of advocating for universal coverage. In each session I've been in Congress, I've introduced a bill to provide universal access to health care. More recently, I joined with Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) to put forward a framework to cover all Americans through the Medicare for All Act.

I hope, however, that a first step to universal coverage will be covering all children. I worked closely with Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) in the past Congress to provide health coverage to all American kids by co-authoring the Children's Health First Act. In the House, Ways and Means Chairman Charlie Rangel (D-N.Y.) and I led the effort to craft a bipartisan, robust reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program. Unfortunately, on two occasions, President George W. Bush vetoed legislation to strengthen SCHIP and provide health care to 10 million low-income children. When the 111th Congress convenes, we should act as quickly as possible to finally protect the health of America's most vulnerable kids.

Second, while we proceed on a path toward universal coverage, we must also address the issue of cost. We need to find ways to increase both the efficiency and the quality of care. Bringing health care into the information age will be an important step on the path toward that goal. During the 110th Congress, the House Energy and Commerce Committee passed bipartisan, landmark legislation to enhance the use of information technology in the health care sector. The PRO(TECH)T Act would promote greater use of health information technology, such as electronic medical records, to improve the quality of care and reduce costs. This legislation would build on and expand privacy protections for information that will flow at higher speeds and in greater quality in an electronic world. Passing this legislation into law during the 111th Congress will be another important step forward.

Third, we must increase competition in the insurance market and provide affordable, accessible options for American families and businesses. We must consider pooling arrangements and reinsurance for catastrophic costs to help improve competition and access. We must guarantee that health insurance does not exclude pre-existing conditions or otherwise limit care for families buying their own insurance. We must also cut waste, fraud and abuse from the system by ensuring that any federal dollars spent are to secure care, not simply line the pockets of corporate executives and insurers.

Fourth, we must address the public health infrastructure that undergirds universal coverage. This includes addressing work force issues such as education and training of health professionals, fostering a healthy environment for children by tackling obesity and tobacco issues, improving access to school-based health care and support services, renewed investment in research and development for cures to chronic and debilitating diseases as well as disease management programs to improve health and outcomes, and addressing health disparities to ensure they are not carried over into a reformed American health system.

Fifth, a system of universal coverage must provide for the needs of Americans from cradle to grave, for those who are healthy and for those who are sick. This discussion must include a focus on long-term care services that are woefully underfunded, underutilized and overlooked. We know such services and supports are cost-effective and help Americans with disabilities remain in their homes and communities where they belong.

Finally, we must ensure everyone is invested and has a role in the new system. This means that individuals, small and large employers, providers, insurers, and state and federal governments all must come together to make any system work.

I have served in Congress for more than half a century – long enough to have learned that good ideas, good works, and, most importantly, good results do not materialize from thin air. They come from collaborative thinking and collective action.

For too long, political differences have prevented policymakers from enacting universal health care. The time for change has finally arrived, and it must begin with Congressional and administrative leaders working together to improve our national health care system.

Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.) is current chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee.

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