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Dingell: 'Do whatever it takes' to repair broken system

U.S. REP. JOHN DINGELL

The newest incarnation of federal health insurance reform will be bipartisan in terms of ideas, but it unfortunately looks doubtful we will have bipartisan support.

That said, there is little debate about the course of our current health insurance system -- we can't afford the status quo. Warren Buffett has said that, as have the chief executive officers of the Business Roundtable.

Companies can't cover health care expenses -- which is why we see downsizing, stagnation and shrinking benefits.

Families can't handle the costs -- and as a result we are seeing more personal bankruptcies and foreclosures.

According to a Business Roundtable report, employers will pay three times the cost they now pay to insure workers in just the next decade if we do not act.

Reform will not be easy, but it is infinitely better than the status quo, which is costing us untold billions of dollars. Americans spend almost 18 percent of our gross domestic product or total economic output on health care.

Now consider this: The Commonwealth Fund estimates that if we had passed the reform proposed by President Richard Nixon, health spending would be 10.7 percent of GDP. If we passed President Jimmy Carter's initiative, it would be 11.5 percent. Passage of President Bill Clinton's plan would have it at 14.2 percent.

But partisan bickering torpedoed those efforts. We must stop making the same mistake over again and do whatever it takes to reform the broken system.

That's why the House and Senate passed health care reform bills last year. While we would prefer to have bipartisan support for health care reform, the universal opposition of Republicans leaves us no option other than to consider using budget reconciliation going forward.

This is despite the historic efforts of President Barack Obama to incorporate the ideas of anyone willing to seriously help cut our spiraling, out-of-control health care costs.

And don't be fooled by rhetoric that reconciliation is a gimmick. It's not.

Reconciliation has been used to reform health care before. COBRA health insurance subsidies for the unemployed, the Children's Health Insurance Program and Medicare Advantage all passed under reconciliation.

Between 1981 and 2008, reconciliation has been used 21 times. The vast majority of the bills -- 16 out of the

21 -- have been initiated by Republicans. And many of these were for sweeping policy changes. Most recently, Republicans used the reconciliation process to enact the \$1.3 trillion George W. Bush tax cuts.

If we are to extend the solvency of the Medicare trust fund, close the prescription drug doughnut hole for seniors, end discrimination against people with pre-existing conditions and end the ability of insurance companies to cut off your coverage even as you are being wheeled into the operating room, we must do whatever it takes to pass this bill.

Our health care reform proposal isn't perfect, but no legislation is. Yet, it will do a lot of good for a lot of Americans.

Based on independent, nonpartisan analysis, it will slow the alarming rate of growth of health care costs. It reduces the deficit in the next 10 years by more than \$100 billion and reduces it by even more in the out years.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office reports that our plan will slow the growth of health care premiums.

In fact, the vast majority of premiums would go down under our plan.

Casting the health care reform debate as a victory for one party or a defeat for another misses the bigger picture. Going without health reform is a catastrophic defeat for all Americans, regardless of party registration. We may not all agree on the issues, but certainly we can all agree that the outstanding medical care Americans enjoy isn't any good to us if we can't afford it.

U.S. Rep. John Dingell, D-Dearborn, is the chairman emeritus of the House Energy and Commerce Committee and has a lead role in crafting health reform legislation.

Additional Facts

What do you think?

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