



GOP must support Medicare's promise

By: **Rep. John Dingell**

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On April 8, 1965, I presided over the House of Representatives when we passed a bill creating Medicare, a program that provides seniors health care and financial stability. It was one of the proudest moments in my 53 years serving in Congress.

Medicare is built on a promise: If you work hard and pay your taxes, you will have an insurance program for your medical care that will free you from the threat of poverty in your retirement years. This promise must be kept, and we must guarantee that Medicare is able to adapt to the changing health needs of our seniors.

I wish I could say we had a strong bipartisan effort to get it done. Only 13 Republicans in the Senate and 70 in the House voted for the bill that created Medicare. Since then, my Democratic colleagues and I have spent 44 years protecting seniors against Republican proposals to cut or eliminate Medicare. After all, a program that three-quarters of Americans say is important to their families (according to an April Kaiser Family Foundation poll) must be doing something right.

President Ronald Reagan, idolized by Republicans, warned in 1961 that the creation of Medicare would put the country on the path to socialism. In the 1996 presidential campaign, Bob Dole bragged about voting against the original bill, boasting, "I was there, fighting the fight, voting against Medicare." John McCain's health care platform in the 2008 presidential election similarly proposed to cut \$1.3 trillion from Medicare and Medicaid over 10 years.

I was a member of the Bipartisan Commission on Entitlement and Tax Reform in 1993 and the Bipartisan Commission on the Future of Medicare in 1997. In each, Democrats worked feverishly to beat back Republican attempts to either slow spending or kill Medicare. Republicans tried to end the "defined benefit" plan, which allows seniors to get the treatment they need covered. Instead, the GOP wanted to replace that popular offering with a "defined contribution," which would give seniors a fixed amount of money to pay for what they need but nothing more if their medical expenses exceed that contribution. That tack is still a favorite proposal of conservative members and think tanks.

In fact, as recently as April, 137 Republican members — the majority of the House Republican Conference — voted for such a plan in a GOP alternative budget that called for "replacing the traditional Medicare program with subsidies to help retirees enroll in private health care plans." Under their plan, future retirees would not even have the option of buying into the traditional Medicare program. Medicare as we know it — upon which generations of seniors have depended for health care — would cease to exist once the last retirees still eligible pass away.

Protecting Medicare? No, these Republicans voted to end the program, throwing our

seniors at the mercy of the insurance industry, whose practices include denial, termination of coverage for pre-existing conditions, discrimination and sky-high fees for the elderly.

Now the same Republicans who tried to kill Medicare in the spring want us to think they're embracing it this fall?

Many of these same representatives are now misrepresenting proposals from President Barack Obama and congressional Democrats and spreading misinformation to scare seniors. Democratic proposals will strengthen Medicare, ensuring its availability for future generations. The bill will cut waste, while eliminating both the doughnut hole and co-payments for preventive services and improving subsidies to ensure Medicare is affordable for those with low and modest incomes. All can take comfort in knowing the bill also ensures doctors in the program are paid appropriately for services they provide seniors. In other words, people don't have to worry about doctors dropping out of Medicare en masse.

In the absence of reform, Medicare risks insolvency as health care costs skyrocket. More than 43 million people relied on Medicare for health coverage last year, and with baby boomers aging, the program's rolls are expected to expand to 77 million by 2031.

When Medicare passed, Republican Sen. Carl Curtis of Nebraska said Medicare was "brazen socialism ... [and] socialism is not the answer to anything." On the House floor, Republican Rep. Durward Hall of Missouri purported Medicare was an "ill-conceived adventure in government medicine."

These accusations of "socialism" and "government medicine" sound familiar — they are the same arguments Republicans are leveling against health care reform today. They were wrong then, and they are wrong now.

If today's Republicans want to prove they are different and serious about strengthening Medicare, they should promise — in writing — that they will not shift the "defined benefit" to a "defined contribution." If they do that, I will applaud my Republican colleagues for standing behind their words and supporting a single-payer, government-run health program.

The longest-serving member in the history of the House of Representatives, Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.) is the author of H.R. 3200, America's Affordable Health Choices Act.

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