

Unfinished business from 20th century: fixing healthcare

Contributed by Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.)
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Hubert Humphrey once said, "The moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped."

In Humphrey's day, Democrats answered that test with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Medicare, Medicaid and Head Start. Today, quality healthcare for all stands alone as the great unfinished business of 20th century progressive social legislation.

But in the 21st century, we must now realize that our failed healthcare system is not just a moral challenge - it's a major economic liability, too. That's why our Democratic platform reflects the reality that making affordable, meaningful healthcare a right for all -not a privilege for some - is essential to our economic future.

Today we see firsthand the economic costs of a broken healthcare system. We spend more than \$2 trillion on healthcare - one of every six dollars spent in our economy. Under this administration, healthcare premiums have risen 78 percent while income has stagnated for most families. Our auto companies spend five times as much on healthcare as their closest international competition; in fact, GM and Ford now spend more on healthcare than they do on steel. For all that we spend, 47 million Americans, including 9 million children, have no insurance protection at all.

While leaving millions of Americans uninsured might seem to save money, the inefficient care that the uninsured do receive taxes the entire healthcare system and economy. The result is a destructive dynamic in which high costs lead to more uninsured Americans, and more uninsured Americans contribute to higher costs. We have to break the cycle.

Sen. Barack Obama's (D-Ill.) plan and the Democratic platform are committed to getting it right. We have proposed guaranteeing that every American has access to an affordable health plan that's portable and just as good as the one their member of Congress has. But to achieve lasting success, we also propose to attack cost by modernizing healthcare delivery, reducing waste, investing in information technology and controlling the cost of catastrophic illness.

Better technology yields far greater efficiency. Today about one-third of health spending does not improve patient health. That accounts for a remarkable 5 percent of our national GDP. It's just plain waste, and in many cases it makes things worse for patients. The overuse, under-use and misuse of healthcare can be contained by giving our providers better information about what works and what doesn't, then rewarding those who use this information and penalizing those who do not. Today, the inefficiencies in our healthcare system are like a flat tire that prevents our entire economy from running smoothly.

To tame the rising price of healthcare, we must also address the burdens that chronic or catastrophic illnesses place on our current system. That means finding a way to make sure that the most expensive conditions -many of which, a mere generation ago, were untreatable - do not drive up healthcare premiums for everyone else. We need a government "reinsurance" program to help cover these costs.

That is our plan - rooted in a deep understanding of our current healthcare system, a belief in smart policy that emphasizes the convergence of economic self-interest and shared responsibility, and reflective of years spent listening to the American people.

Unfortunately, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) has dusted off George Bush's so-called "ownership society" - and claimed it as his own. The McCain-Bush plan could force 160 million Americans to give up their current group health insurance and instead use an insufficient tax break to purchase a new individual plan in a market that regularly discriminates against the sick and the elderly. According to a recent report, as many as 90 million could be turned away by HMOs because of age, gender or preexisting conditions. McCain's message is clear: "You're on your own."

Democrats have long been winning this argument on the merits. What's different now is that business leaders from the CEO of Wal-Mart to the National Federation of Independent Businesses have realized their stake in fixing a broken system and lent their voices to the chorus of calls for change.

So let us live up to the great moral tradition of our party - and strengthen America's economy - with a healthcare system that finally works for all Americans.

Kerry was the Democrats' 2004 presidential nominee.