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Obama takes case to nation's doctors

Response to reform plan mixed

Staff and wire reports

President Obama made his most detailed pitch yet for a \$1 trillion overhaul of the burdened U.S. health care system, telling the nation's largest doctor's group Monday that a "ticking time bomb" threatens the nation's prosperity.

The crowd of physicians from the powerful American Medical Association was unreceptive to parts of the president's speech, and three South Dakota doctors who attended the speech in Chicago said they could support an Obama plan that fixes only what is broken about the health care system while building on what already works.

Boos erupted when Obama told the doctors that he would not try to help them win their top legislative priority in Congress: setting limits on jury damages in medical malpractice lawsuits.

While American physicians are discouraged and even angry about a system that overburdens them with paperwork and allows private insurance companies too much power to dictate treatment, many doctors worry even more about government involvement in their relationships with patients.

Throughout his 55-minute speech, Obama sought to inoculate himself against opponents who have suggested his proposal would amount to a government takeover of health care.

"If you like your doctor, you will be able to keep your doctor. Period. If you like your health care plan, you will be able to keep your health care plan. Period. No one will take it away. No matter what."

S.D. doctors respond

For doctors in South Dakota and elsewhere, keeping parts of the existing health care system intact was a welcome idea.

"There's little question we have features of our health care system that are excellent," said Dr. Dan Heinemann, chief medical officer of Sanford Health's health service division, who was at the speech Monday. "We need to work on making access and affordability and doing things about quality (better.)"

Dr. Mary Carpenter, a family practitioner from Winner, said Obama wants to invest in technology to give doctors immediate access to patient records to prevent repetitive care, control costs and improve safety. He also wants to decrease the cost of medical education and promote more people in primary care.

"That is good for South Dakota because primary care is where most of South Dakota citizens get at least a start to their health care," Carpenter said.

Though Obama's plan sounds promising, Carpenter, AMA delegate for South Dakota, said she is concerned about Obama's position on liability reform, and more details are needed about his public option plan.

"We really don't think that just expanding the Medicare-Medicaid program is going to do it," she said.

Dr. Herb Saloum, a part-time, semi-retired family practitioner in Tyndall, thinks Congress is committed to health care reform. He expects that Congress would have a bill ready to be presented to the president by late summer or early fall.

Saloum said he is concerned about an increase in the number of patients on a federal plan.

"Physicians are going to be dealing with the government much more than they are used to," he said.

Obama: Time is right

Obama tried to preserve an emerging consensus that the time might be right to overhaul the nation's health care system.

"We are spending over \$2 trillion a year on health care, almost 50 percent more per person than the next most costly nation," Obama told the 2,200 people in attendance at the AMA's annual meeting in Chicago. "For all this spending, more of our citizens are uninsured, the quality of our care is often lower, and we aren't any healthier."

Brian Kaatz, University of South Dakota health services department dean, said the nation's health care system needs to be changed, saying U.S. health care spending is higher per-capita than any other country.

Kaatz has traveled to Sweden, France and the United Kingdom, which have universal health care. While dozens of Europeans have issues with waiting, none of them said they would trade it for the U.S. system, he said.

"Difficulties with personal health are not going to bankrupt you or change your life," Kaatz said.

Cost concerns

But the challenges of major health care legislation were underscored Monday by a report from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, which estimated that the first major Democratic health bill - prepared by Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass. - could cost about \$1 trillion in the next decade, while covering only about 16 million more people. There are more than 46 million people without coverage.

Obama was greeted with several standing ovations, particularly on his willingness to work with the AMA. But he was booed when he said he would not change his stance on malpractice award caps.

Obama was careful to express understanding of the challenges doctors face with malpractice lawsuits and the paperwork required by insurance companies.

"I'm not advocating caps on malpractice awards, which I personally believe can be unfair to people who've been wrongfully harmed," Obama said.

He said he would sit down with doctors to address liability reform, encouraging "evidence-based medicine" so physicians would not see the need to order unnecessary tests just to prevent lawsuits.

Argus Leader reporter Melanie Brandert contributed to this story.

Additional Facts

Daschle speaks out

Former South Dakota Sen. Tom Daschle says controlling the cost of malpractice insurance will have to be a part of the Obama administration's overhaul of the health care system.

The onetime Democratic leader in the Senate said he believes "tort reform is going to be on the table," and that it's important that all "stakeholders" in the looming debate be given a chance to be heard.

Daschle also said in an interview Monday on CBS's "The Early Show" that he thinks a significant portion of an estimated \$76 billion in unnecessary annual health care costs can be attributed to doctors ordering extra tests and taking extra precautions to make sure "they aren't sued."

Daschle and fellow former Senate Majority Leaders Bob Dole and Howard Baker plan to unveil a proposed plan for major health care reform, according to the Bipartisan Policy Center, an organization that was founded by Senators Daschle, Dole, and Baker, as well as Senator George Mitchell.

Daschle was President Barack Obama's first choice for secretary of health and human services, but withdrew his name in a controversy over his personal finances.

-Staff and wire reports
