

CHEYENNE MEDICAL PROVIDERS TELL CONGRESS: SLOW DOWN ON HEALTH-CARE REFORM

A coalition said it's worried about the implications for patients, during a meeting here.

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CHEYENNE -- There is no bad guy in the debate over health-care reform, according to one doctor.

There are only bad systems with more bureaucracy than patient care, said Dr. Marcy Zwelling-Aamot. The internist from Southern California joined local medical providers in calling for patient-centered health reform that is decided at a local level.

Members of the Coalition to Protect Patients' Rights also urged members of Congress to take their time during a news conference Thursday at the Greater Cheyenne Chamber of Commerce. The coalition's membership includes 35 organizations such as the American Nurses Association, the American Physical Therapy Association and the Integrated Health Policy Consortium.

"No one argues that we don't need (health-care reform)," said Dr. Jerry Calkins. "The question is what form it will take and where the priorities are at."

Dr. Larry Meuli said he worries that a public option would unravel care for the 160 million Americans who have health coverage.

Zwelling-Aamot said reformers also have neglected the importance of the doctor-patient relationship. The last thing patients want to hear is "what is your insurance plan" when they visit with chest pains or nausea. They want to hear about treatment options instead.

She said another problem is that the medical community hasn't defined the costs of care. Nobody knows what a doctor's visit is worth or if patients could find a better price somewhere else because there is no competition.

Calkins said he wonders who would pay for the congressional plan and whether government subsidies create an even playing field that includes a place for the private sector.

The poor economy has already squeezed small-business owners. Mismanaged reform could make the problem worse, said Dale Steenbergen, president and CEO of the Greater Cheyenne Chamber of Commerce and a member of the Chamber Alliance for Health Reform.

"They may have health care, but they won't have food to eat because they don't have a job," he added.

Insurance premiums and co-payments didn't increase for members of the Wyoming Contractors Association this year, said executive vice president Jonathan Downing. But a government-backed plan could alter the successful management of private options.

Calkins said the discussion also has steered away from issues like malpractice liability and the high costs of defensive medicine.

Last year, U.S. Sen. Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., introduced his "10 Steps to Transform Health Care in America." But the suggestions to allow people to buy insurance plans across state lines and lift restrictions on health-care pools are largely ignored by Congress.

Meuli said lawmakers also have ignored other models for care. He added that Wyoming's successful Kid Care program was designed to look like a private insurance plan and not Medicaid.

Zwelling-Aamot said she fears that the plan before Congress would add more bureaucracy to a system already plagued with more forms than time for patients.