



Health care forum focuses on chronic illness

By Guy Boulton of the Journal Sentinel

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Madison - Working to prevent and manage chronic disease can help control the rise in health care costs - and controlling the rise in health care costs will be essential to significant health care reform.

That was one of the key themes Tuesday at the third in a series of forums on health care reform being held throughout the country.

It also brought broad agreement from a panel that included Tommy G. Thompson, a former Republican governor of Wisconsin and former secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and Dick Gephardt, former Democratic majority leader of the House of Representatives.

Focusing on areas of general agreement is one of the goals of the forums, "Summit Conversations on American Health Care for the 21st Century." America's Agenda, a group that consists largely of labor unions, sponsors the forums.

The topics include preventing disease by encouraging healthier lifestyles; managing chronic disease; making full use of health information technology; and restructuring the incentives in the health care system.

Those are largely the easy issues in health care reform. The session on Tuesday touched just occasionally on the tough issues, such as expanding coverage for the long-term uninsured and restructuring the way in which doctors and hospitals are paid.

"Nothing as big and emotional and costly as health care (reform) is going to be easy," Rep. Ron Kind (D-Wis.) said.

Agreement ended on whether health care reform should include expanding coverage.

Gephardt, for instance, said reform should first focus on slowing the rise in costs.

The forum drew attention to the potential saving from preventing and managing chronic diseases. Those diseases account for 75% of health care spending, when cancer is included, and two-thirds of the growth in spending.

Preventing chronic diseases will require getting people to lose weight, stop smoking and exercise more. That's already happening at many employers.

"The more we can do to help our employees stay healthy, the lower our costs will be," said Sharon Fiehler, executive vice president and chief administrative officer of Peabody Energy in St. Louis.

Managing chronic disease will require changing the way doctors and hospitals are paid. The cost saving from those changes will take years to be realized.

But Jeff Thompson, a physician and chief executive of Gundersen Lutheran Health System in La Crosse, noted that the growth in health care costs could be slowed by reducing the wide variation on the cost of end-of-life care and by lowering the rate of hospital admissions.

For example, Medicare saves more than \$40,000 during a patient's last two years of life when they are treated at Gundersen Lutheran than at the University of Miami Hospital & Clinics.

That's one example of the potential cost saving from health care reform.

Systematic change will take time, Kind said.

But, he added, "There's a lot of low-hanging fruit."

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