

MAINE VOICES

Don't delay reforming health care

Letting disruptive forces create doubt about the direction we should take is unconscionable.

FALMOUTH — I am sickened by the direction the current debate on health care reform is headed.

As was pointed out in the Aug. 5 column by editorial writer Greg Kesch, the effort to reform our health care delivery and financing system is threatened by interests on the ideological extremes.

Instead of thoughtful conversation about the details on covering the uninsured, we find ourselves defending minor points such as physicians advising patients on advanced directives and end-of-life care.

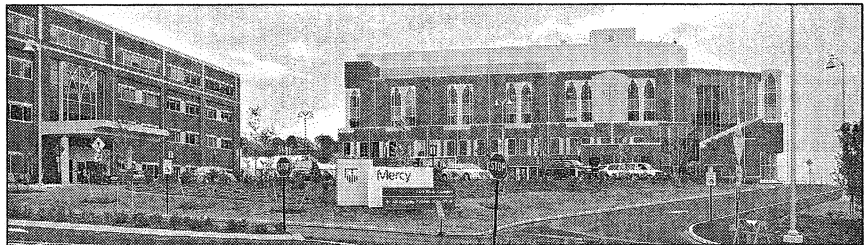
Instead of working on ideas to improve the quality of care and promote patient safety, we are distracted by the question of whether or not abortion should be a covered medical service.

GOVERNMENT IS INVOLVED

When we wish to present the possibility of a public, nonprofit entity (remember the "original" Blue Cross Blue Shield of Maine), we are deluged with inflammatory rhetoric about a "governmental takeover of health care"! Apparently no one has told the critics that, in the state of Maine, government is paying 56 percent to 57 percent of the total costs of health care already.

Why do so many physicians support reform, including even the American Medical Association? The reasoning is really quite simple. In 1970, the cost of health care in the United States accounted for 7 percent of the Gross Domestic Product. In 2007, health care accounted for 16 percent and that number continues to grow.

Health care costs averaged 2½ percentage points greater than overall inflation for the last 35 years. And, yes, while we are proud of the improvements in the products and services over that period of time, the simple fact of the matter is that the



2008 Telegram file

Mercy Hospital in Portland, here shown on its new campus just before the buildings' opening last year, and other Maine hospitals can provide better care under a reformed system than they do now, the head of the state medical association says.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jo Linder, M.D., is an emergency physician who resides in Falmouth. She is chair of the executive committee of the Maine Medical Association.

cost of care and the inefficiencies of the financing and delivery system are not sustainable. If the trend line is not changed, spending on health care will crowd out expenditures needed for our children's education, the nation's infrastructure, and the other social service needs.

Why does reform need to be comprehensive and impact everyone, even those with good insurance now? Because anything less than comprehensive reform — at a minimum, insuring every American — results in simply shifting costs.

The Maine Medical Association, with a membership of more than 3,000 physicians, residents, and medical students in the state, supports covering all of our citizens with a health insurance policy or health plan appropriate to the age and circumstances. And once appropriate options are available to everyone, we believe all individuals should be required to be covered, just as all of us are required to have insurance for our motor vehicles. A public plan must remain for those persons who cannot afford coverage.

We already pay for the uninsured and for those who are covered by

plans that do not cover the full cost of care, including Medicaid. The amount we pay in additional costs and premiums for this has now been quantified at nearly \$1,000 per person.

REQUIRE COVERAGE FOR ALL

Rather than pay this hidden tax, it makes sense to require everyone to be adequately covered. This would also have the additional benefit of encouraging people to get care early and to seek preventive care. Many studies have shown that persons without insurance or who are underinsured wait too long to seek care.

I can hear our critics now say that providing such coverage won't automatically translate into adequate care, as we don't have enough physicians and other health care givers to provide care. While this is true, a comprehensive health care reform bill could go a long way toward ensuring an adequate health care work force over time. Reform of the delivery system could go a long way toward eliminating unnecessary care and focusing on care that is of value.

So while health care forums across the country are being disrupted by proponents of the status quo, I ask readers to confront those critics of reform with a simple, straightforward question. What is their solution?

The current trend in our state (which has the second highest per-person costs in the country) and our nation simply is not sustainable.