

Keeping up with the information

Here in Washington DC we are drowning in legislation, data and polls around health care reform this week and frantically trying to absorb it all, compare and contrast with what has gone before and what has been promised, and push back against the inevitable new raft of myths and fabrications that are doing the rounds of the conservative media.

Senate Finance proposal released

Today we finally got to see the work done by Senator Max Baucus, Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. He released his 'Chairman's Mark' (http://finance.senate.gov/sitepages/leg/LEG%202009/091609%20Americas_Healthy_Future_Act.pdf). It has no legislative language as yet, but it's a useful read because it describes what the status quo is and how this would change under the proposed Senate Finance bill, which is scheduled for mark-up in committee next week – and it's only 220 pages!

The downside of the bill is that it's considerably less generous and less expansive than the House version (it will leave 9% of eligible Americans uncovered and make it difficult for some middle-class families to afford mandated cover), doesn't bring a single Republican vote with it (although it's still possible that Senator Olympia Snowe will eventually come on board if the conservatives don't knee-cap her first), and it has alienated key Democrats such as Senator Jay Rockefeller.

Still, it undoubtedly can be called 'health care reform' and as a starting point towards getting legislation reported out from the Finance Committee and on to the Senate floor, it's definitely workable material.

The Congressional Budget Office also released its preliminary analysis (http://finance.senate.gov/sitepages/leg/LEG%202009/091609%20CBO_Analysis.pdf) of the Baucus Chairman's Mark today, and it absolutely conforms to President Obama's vow that health care reform legislation should not add "one dime to the deficit, now or in the future." The CBO has gone beyond the normal 10-year time frame to look at the impact in 20 year's time and finds the proposal, if enacted, would increase the rate of cost savings and reduce the federal deficit in the second decade.

Doctors strong support for health care reform

A Robert Wood Johnson Foundation study (<http://www.rwjf.org/healthreform/quality/product.jsp?id=48408>) published in this week's *New England Journal of Medicine* shows that a majority of doctors (63%) support a health reform proposal that includes both a public option and traditional private

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insurance. If the additional 10% of doctors who support an entirely public health system are included, then approximately three out of four physicians nationwide support inclusion of a public option. A minority (27%) support a private-only option that would provide subsidies for low-income individuals to purchase private insurance.

The majority of doctors surveyed found Medicare better or the same as private insurance in decision making autonomy (60%) and in ease of obtaining needed services (57%).

Meanwhile, health insurance costs continue to rise

The 2009 Employer Health Benefits Survey

(<http://www.kff.org/insurance/7936/index.cfm>) released today by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Health Research & Educational Trust showed how unsustainable the status quo is.

Premiums for employer-sponsored health insurance rose to \$13,375 annually for family coverage this year -- with employees on average paying \$3,515 and employers paying \$9,860. Since 1999, premiums have gone up a total of 131%, far more rapidly than workers' wages (up 38%) or inflation (up 28%).

The survey found that 60% of firms offered health benefits to any of their workers this year, but only 46% of the smallest businesses offered health benefits. Among those firms offering benefits, 21% report they reduced the scope of health benefits or increased cost sharing, and 15% report they increased the worker's share of the premium.

Recent work by the Center for American Progress

(http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/09/family_health_spending.html) shows that escalating health care costs threaten to erode the income of the more than 160 million people who depend on employer-sponsored coverage. Without real changes to the health care system, annual health care spending for families of four with employer-sponsored coverage will grow from nearly \$17,000 today to over \$39,000 by 2019, or from 19% of family income to 31%.