

LETTER FROM WASHINGTON No 17

30 September 2009

Slow and steady is winning the health care reform race

There's an article in last weekend's Washington Post (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2009/09/26/ST2009092602799.html>) that should be required reading for anyone who queries why health care reform should be such a priority in the US. The piece looks at the health insurance issues faced by the people living in a small street in Gaithersburg, Maryland, a garden suburb about 30 miles north of Washington DC. It's a sobering insight into the financial and medical worries of middle-class America, and the bureaucracy battles they must engage in every time medical care is needed.

To an Australian, these stories also highlight how silly Americans' concerns about government takeovers and intervention are when nameless, faceless insurance administrators routinely say which doctors they can see and what services will be paid for, and too often rescind coverage when people really get sick and the bills mount up.

It's ironic that health insurance companies profit by depriving patients of needed treatment. Every day there are stories (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/18/AR2009091803501.html>) of people refused coverage because health insurers have deemed acne, bunions, high blood pressure or a previous C-section as pre-existing conditions. And other stories (<http://www.consumerwatchdog.org/patients/articles/?storyId=27994>) of sick people losing coverage for needed medicines or treatment because the costs are considered too high.

In Gaithersburg, when it comes to their health care, no-one is happy, everyone has a complaint. Nobody understands the way the current system works, only that it doesn't work very well, even for those people with expensive policies and expendable incomes. A working mother of three young children summed it up this way; "I don't know what everyone is so afraid of, I don't know what amazing coverage these people have that they're so afraid of losing."

These are the people President Obama must count on to give his health care reform effort the grass-roots push it needs to get through Congress. But it's only recently that the White House has realized the need to focus on this group which constitutes about 65% of the population.

With many middle-class families still facing huge financial burdens and uncertain employment prospects, the new selling language for health care reform is around providing more security and stability for those with insurance – and it's working.

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One reason why this message appeals is that one out of three Americans under 65 were without health insurance at some point during 2007 and 2008, and 80% of these uninsured people were in working families. They lost cover because they lost their job, or were required to work reduced hours, or just simply could not afford the premiums which now average over \$13,000 a year for coverage for a family of four.

Increasingly the polls show that the conservative members (of both parties) of the Senate Finance Committee who are still wrangling over amendments are out of touch with what the public wants. Yesterday saw two amendments to add a public health insurance option to the Senate Finance bill go down, despite the fact that over 60% of the population supports this approach to making health coverage more affordable.

Recent polls (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/26/opinion/26blow.html>) show that despite the summer town hall meetings, tea parties and tirades and the accompanying misinformation and hysteria, Obama's approval ratings are where Ronald Reagan's and Bill Clinton's were at this point in their presidencies. The President polls ahead of the Republicans in Congress on all the issues interrogated.

Issue	President	Republicans
Approval rating	56%	30%
Who has better ideas about reforming the health care system?	52%	27%
Is Obama trying to work with Republicans to reform health care and vice versa?	60%	30%
Who's to blame if health care reform does not pass this year?	10%	37%

The latest Kaiser Health Tracking Poll

(<http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/posr092909pkg.cfm>), out today, finds that 57% of Americans now believe that tackling health care reform is more important than ever - up from 53% in August. The proportion of Americans who think their families would be better off if health reform passes is up six percentage points (42% versus 36% in August), and the percentage who think that the country would be better off is up eight points (to 53% from 45% in August).

Like me, the public continues to view the action in Washington with mixed feelings. The largest share (68%) said they were "hopeful" about reform, but 50% are "anxious" and 31% are "angry."