

LETTER FROM WASHINGTON

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The Republicans' last ditch stand on health care reform

At least for those of us working in health policy, there's a frisson of excitement in the chill Washington air today because tomorrow the House will take up the health care reform bill. The media is full of reports about last minute glitches, but everyone knows that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her leadership team know how to count votes. So I think we can be optimistic about the outcome.

Yesterday the right wing staged a rally in support of the Republican agenda – essentially a rally for no solution to the health care crisis. Endorsed by Republican lawmakers - with promotional help from Fox News and conservative hate radio - organizers called the event “an emergency house call on Congress” to stop health care reform. They claimed a crowd of up to a million protestors, but Capitol Police estimated around 4,000.

As has become the norm at Tea Parties rallies, some of imagery was radical and offensive, with one prominent sign invoking an image of dead Jews from the Holocaust to warn that the Democratic health care plan will do the same for Americans. The protests came on the same day as two key groups in the health care debate - the American Medical Association and the American Association of Retired Persons – endorsed the House Democrats' health care bill.

Minutes into the rally, a man standing just beyond the TV cameras apparently suffered a heart attack. Medical personnel from the Capitol physician's office - an entity that could, quite accurately, be labeled government-run health care - rushed over to assist him with a heart monitor, oxygen and an IV drip. This turned into an unwanted visual for the speakers. The patient, attended to by about 10 government medical personnel, was being wheeled away on a stretcher just as House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-Ohio) stepped to the microphone, exhorting the crowd to "Join us in defeating Pelosi care!"

By the time it was over, medics had administered government-run health care to at least five people in the crowd who were stricken as they denounced government-run health care.

The recently-released Republican alternative bill does little to address the problems facing the American health care system. In fact it addresses only a fraction of the issues that Republicans have previously outlined as important.

The Congressional Budget Office found that the GOP bill would only insure about 3 million additional Americans, leaving 52 million without cover, while doing nothing to prevent discrimination for people with pre-existing conditions. And because the plan

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allows coverage to be purchased across state lines without strict regulations, insurance companies would be permitted to ignore state consumer protection laws. There is nothing to lower either health care costs or the costs of insurance, and nothing to address the oft-cited guarantees that people can keep their health insurance and their doctor.