Health Care Is the Economy

Last year, General Motors paid more for health care than it did for steel. Starbucks’ bill for health insurance exceeded its bill for coffee beans. One in five farmers paid one-third of its annual income for health care insurance. As a country, Americans spent over $2.2 trillion for health care, the highest price tag of any country in the world. But, are we getting the best health care?

Frequently, we hear that this country cannot afford to provide health care for all Americans. Yet, emergency rooms are crammed with uninsured patients that sit for hours waiting for care. Clearly, Americans are already paying for socialized health care for those who need it.

One option frequently discussed is privatization of health care but, it does not seem to offer an effective solution to our broken health care system. In a recent study reported in the Journal of Health Care, when the federal government privatized 25% percent of Medicare, the quality of care decreased dramatically, bureaucratic forms increased substantively, and the price of health care jumped by 13%.

There is another option. Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs) offer a viable, cost-effective solution to our health care crisis. APRNs are licensed registered nurses with master’s or doctoral degrees certified through national board examinations. Like primary care physicians, APRNs diagnose and treat patients who are acutely or chronically ill with common conditions.

When one considers that 49% of health care costs are spent on 5% of the population with chronic conditions, it is apparent that APRNs can play a vital role. Furthermore, APRNs are skilled at working with patients in their homes and in the community reducing the need for costly emergency room care.

Research indicates that patients and their families are quite satisfied with the health care they receive from APRNs. If one considers medical law suits as one indicator of patient satisfaction, only 0.02% of lawsuits are directed against APRNs.

Currently, over 14,000 APRNs are practicing in California and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has noted that registered nursing is the top profession for job growth in the future. The annual average salary for APRNs is reasonable, given their education, skill set, and level of responsibility, approximately $81,517.
Both President Barack Obama and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger’s proposed new health care plans rely heavily on APRNs. President Obama’s plan provides health care insurance for all. Obviously, the greater number of insured individuals, the less the cost of insurance. The plan stipulates that children must be covered, which is especially cost-effective because they are the healthiest of all patient populations. Small businesses will get a 50% tax deduction for insurance coverage costs, and they will not be able to refuse or drop health care coverage for their employees. Insurance companies will not be permitted to refuse to cover pre-existing conditions.

President Obama’s plan eliminates copays for prevention and utilizes APRNS in schools and work sites, and includes programs that focus on high-risk health behaviors such as smoking, obesity, etc. The plan also relies on APRNs to provide out-patient care to those with chronic conditions. Every health care program in Obama’s plan has objective output measures and if positive outcomes are not obtained, funding to that program would be cut.

Schwarzenegger’s health care proposal for California reflects policy recommendations from the Institute of Medicine, a think tank composed of nurse scientists, physicians, and health researchers that provides independent advice about the nation’s health. The Institute has warned that regulatory barriers to APRN practice are contributing to the problems in our health care system.

The media has focused on Schwarzenegger’s aims to overhaul health care financing, streamline electronic record keeping, and eliminate the growing strain on emergency rooms to serve the uninsured. However, little attention has been paid to another of his proposed important reforms -- the removal of bureaucratic measures that limit the public’s ability to select an APRN as a health care provider. Unfortunately, in California, APRNs cannot own their practice or be designated as primary care providers on most insurance managed health care plans.

Removal of these barriers would do much to expedite the President’s and Governor’s proposals for curing America’s health care crisis and should be strongly considered by business and civic leaders.

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