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Idaho Dems join call for health care reform

Lewiston legislator John Rusche, a former doctor, says the medical system is broken and needs to be repaired

On the eve of a prime-time address by President Obama, Idaho Democrats highlighted the need for health care reform during a teleconference with reporters Tuesday.

Obama's hour-long news conference will be aired by the three major television networks tonight, beginning at 5 p.m. Pacific Standard Time. It's the latest in a series of speeches and presentations the president has made recently, as he pushes Congress to approve some type of health care reform package in the coming weeks.

Idaho House Minority Leader John Rusche of Lewiston told reporters health care and the health care delivery system "needs to change in Idaho, like every place else" in the country.

"It's too costly, it's unavailable to lots of people and it's the leading cause of individual bankruptcies," said Rusche, who spent 15 years as a pediatrician and another 11 years working as medical director and vice president for Regence BlueShield of Idaho.

Among other features, he said, meaningful reform should include the ability to choose your own doctor, health coverage for all Americans and the ability to participate in your own health care decisions. It should also address how health care is delivered to consumers. Primary care physicians need to have a greater role in directing and coordinating care for their patients, rather than leaving it to hospitals and specialists to dominate that discussion, as is the case now, Rusche added. "Successful health organizations have a primary care base," Rusche said. Health care reform "has to include changes in how service is delivered, or we won't be able to afford the expanded coverage."

It isn't clear at this point how much Obama's reforms might cost Idaho and the other states, he said. The three main reform bills addressed in Congress all include an expansion of Medicaid benefits. Depending on how much of that is left to the states, Idaho could face a significant increase in costs.

"But are we not bearing some of that cost now?" Rusche asked, referring to the indigent health care program that requires the state and counties to pick up the medical costs for certain people who can't otherwise afford treatment. Given the current lack of transparency in the health care system, he said, it's difficult to determine whether taxpayers and patients are getting the highest value for their dollars. New treatments are disseminated without a thorough evaluation of their benefits, and no analysis of their cost. The wise use of new health information technology could also help improve care and reduce costs.

"All of that needs to be part of any reform package," Rusche said. "The bigger question isn't where the money comes from, but how to insure that we get value for our money."