

Lewiston Tribune, Saturday, Aug. 8, 2009 – by William Spence

AAFP president: Time is a factor for health care reform

Boise physician urges action at Democratic National Convention

WORLEY, Idaho - Challenging Democrats to "mobilize like you never have before," Boise physician Ted Epperly said this is the time to implement health care reform. "The bottom line is we must have this. We must get to a better health care system in this country," Epperly said, speaking to about 75 people at the Democratic National Convention's Western States Caucus convention here Friday.

Americans have struggled with this issue for more than 100 years, he said, yet millions still lack health insurance or face bankruptcy because of soaring medical costs. Medicare, the single-largest health care program in the country, is facing insolvency by 2017. Health care is the largest sector of the entire economy, with total expenditures of \$2.4 trillion per year.

"That's why there's so much tension and friction around (health care) reform: A lot of people have gotten extremely rich off the system," said Epperly, a retired Army colonel and president of the American Academy of Family Practitioners, which represents more than 93,000 family physicians and medical students nationwide.

Three separate reform proposals are currently making their way through Congress, he said. They range in price from about \$600 billion over 10 years to \$1.6 trillion. "(President Barack) Obama has set \$1 trillion as the cutting point," Epperly said. "He believes that's doable, without increasing the deficit. Two-thirds of that would come through efficiencies and one-third through tax increases."

Of the \$2.4 trillion Americans spend on health care, Epperly said, the Congressional Budget Office has estimated that a third of that - or \$800 billion per year - is wasted on duplicate or redundant tests and procedures, overhead and other inefficiencies. The House version also includes a public insurance option, he said, a controversial alternative to for-profit private health insurance and the taxpayer-funded Medicare/Medicaid system. Most Republicans, together with conservative "Blue Dog" Democrats such as Idaho's Walt Minnick, oppose the public option, Epperly said. Instead, some have floated the idea of health insurance cooperatives. These would be state or regional public-private partnerships that would provide insurance plans unique to their area.

At this point, Epperly said, there doesn't appear to be enough support to pass a public option. "It's a line in the sand," he said. "Trying to get it would blow the whole (reform effort) apart. The co-op plan gets enough buy-in to move things forward." As lawmakers return to their districts for the August recess, Epperly encouraged the audience to talk with their congressmen and attend their town hall meetings, rather than leave the field to reform opponents. "There are people who are trying to disrupt (these meetings)," he said. "The four forces that sunk (previous reform efforts) are rearing their heads. Why? Because there's so much money on the table. This is what a fight for \$2.4 trillion feels like. But the soul of our country is at stake."