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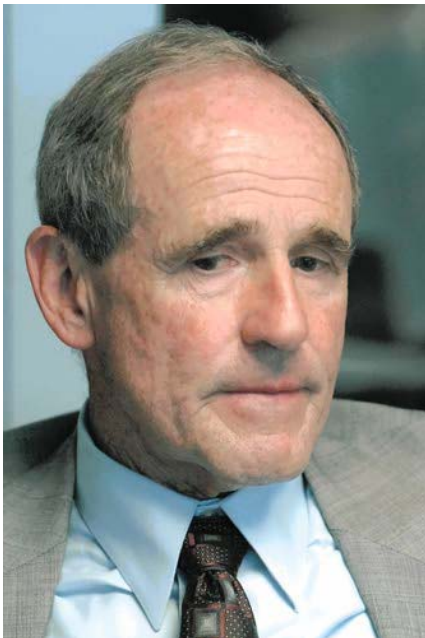
Risch wary of current health care proposals

Idaho senator says reforms are on wrong track

Idaho Sen. Jim Risch says the health care reforms being debated in Washington, D.C., are so flawed and so expensive, even doing nothing and maintaining the status quo would be a better alternative at this point.

Risch was in Lewiston Friday to help dedicate the new nursing building at Lewis-Clark State College. He also spoke at the Lewiston Chamber of Commerce luncheon and spent another hour discussing health care reform and other issues at the Lewiston Tribune. While he agreed some reforms are needed, he said if any of the proposals now making their way through Congress is approved in current form, it would mean "the full-blown takeover of the (health) insurance and medical profession by the U.S. government."

Citing statistics that indicate the United States has cancer survivor rates as much as 30 percent higher than other nations, Risch said it's a "myth" Americans don't have good health care.



"We have the best health care in the world," he said. "Yes, it's expensive. That's because we demand the best. I think people are being led to believe that (reform means) they'll get cheap health care, and health care isn't cheap. The problem with the whole debate is that everybody means something different. To the president, reform means everyone is covered. To the doctors and hospitals, it means they're finally going to get paid at least what it costs them to provide service. To employers it means insurance premiums will come down, and to the average American it means they'll get good care for less money."

Holding up one of the 1,000-page reform proposals, Risch said no one in Congress could explain the bill or what the consequences would be if it's approved. "We need to know where we're going and what it costs," he said. To get to that point, "we need to, first, dump everything that's been done so far and start over."

Risch also recommended breaking reform proposals into their component parts, so lawmakers could find areas of bipartisan agreement. Slowing the process down would be beneficial as well, he said. It's taken more than 200 years to develop the system we have, so trying to change it in a matter of months is a recipe for disaster.

The U.S. House of Representatives could take action on its version of health care reform as soon as next month. Another, similar version was approved in July by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, and a third version is still being developed by the Senate Finance Committee. All three proposals would establish minimum standards for any "qualified" health insurance plan - essentially regulating the minimum level of coverage insurers would have to provide.

Risch said "regulation" equates to "the full-blown takeover" of the health insurance industry, because once Congress approves a bill it would be left to federal agencies to write the rules and regulations. He likened the

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consequences to what happened with the Endangered Species Act, when congressional authorization turned into a massive bureaucracy.

"Once Congress turns it over to a federal agency, yes, it would be a 100 percent takeover," he said. "The only insurance plans would be 'qualified' plans, written and approved by the government."

He also questioned how upwards of \$500 billion could be trimmed from Medicare and Medicaid programs without cutting benefits. The Obama administration says the money - which is needed to help pay for the reforms - would come from eliminating fraud and waste and making other improvements, rather than cutting benefits, but Risch was skeptical.

Finally, he said efforts to expand eligibility to Medicaid programs would end up being a massive unfunded mandate for states, which pick up about 30 percent of the total cost.

Risch said he sees no "silver bullet" that would suddenly resolve all problems with the health care system, but said there is room for improvement. For example, he thinks consumers should have a broader choice of health care plans, and that plans should be "portable," meaning people can keep them even when they change jobs or move to different states.

Most importantly, he said, reform needs to focus on obesity, smoking and other negative lifestyle choices that help drive demand for health care services and increase costs. He said Safeway and other corporations have had success with that approach, and it needs to be the model for national health care reform.

Risch said he didn't think any of the reform proposals had enough votes right now to make it through Congress. Pointing to the bill he brought with him, he said once the debate is over, "my fervent prayer is that we come out of it better than when we went in. The status quo would be much better than this."