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Health care professionals give their views on national reform

COEUR d'ALENE -- It was made clear from the beginning by Rep. George Sayler that Monday evening's forum on health care would be a polite and nonpartisan discussion.

"We have no agenda, we won't be discussing any specific proposals or bills in Congress," the Coeur d'Alene Democrat said, insisting there be no shouting or interruptions. "Health care is important, sometimes controversial."

About 120 turned out for the forum sponsored by the Kootenai County Democrats to hear from Sayler and several members of the health care community. And his request for civility was honored.

"It was a much more intelligent discussion at this meeting than some others I've been to," said Joseph Abate of Coeur d'Alene. "Nobody jumped up and shouted 'socialism,' and nobody else yelled 'death panel.' We need to be problem solving, not fear mongering."

Universal health care, though not necessarily a single-payer system or an employer-based plan, is necessary to prevent health care costs from spiraling out of control, said Dr. Don Chisholm, president of the North Idaho Health Network. And insurance companies need to change the way they do business and how they decide what claims to pay. "We need better decision making," he said. "There needs to be some rationale."

Primary health care and preventive medicine rather than emergency room visits and flocks of medical specialists should be the goals of the country, Chisholm said. But Americans also need to take responsibility for their own health. "We are a nation to a large extent obese," he said.

The United States is the opposite of the rest of the industrial nations in turning out only one third of its physicians in primary care. "There aren't enough primary care physicians to man the decks," Chisholm said, warning that the number of doctors in the system is expected to decline in the coming years.

A tremendous amount of resources are spent on testing for rare problems, and with the world's largest economy and largest percentage of that economy going to health care, "Outcome is not measurably where it should be," he said.

Joe Morris, chief executive officer of Kootenai Health, addressed the crowd via a video, as he is in Croatia doing research on other countries' health care systems. One of the biggest problems of the current system is cost shifting, he said, which costs each family in the county an average of \$1,300 per year in extra charges to pay for providing care to the uninsured or indigent, or those who go bankrupt as a result of large medical bills.

"Insurance reform is a positive thing," Morris said. "Every industrialized country in the world except the U.S. has a program to guarantee insurance to all. The price of failure is too great."

For a small business owner, the cost of health insurance is prohibitive, said Karla Mueller, a business owner and member of the Idaho Main Street Alliance. There are too few options, and deductibles of \$5,000 to \$7,500 are "unfathomable to me," she said.

About 100 stayed after the break for the question and answer period at the forum, held in the community room of the Coeur d'Alene Public Library.

One question was how proposed legislation will allow government to reduce costs. Reducing subsidies to Medicare, cutting waste and fraud and eliminating unnecessary procedures are among the possibilities, Saylor said.

Among those attending was Trish Martin of Coeur d'Alene, who said the forum was very informative. Her top issue: "I would like to see a public option."

The forum was recorded, and Saylor said the group is discussing with the city the possibility of airing it on public access cable channel 19.