

Old Country Lawyer, September, 2009
Health Care Reform, the Next Generation

Basking in the glow of Congress having adopted the Cash for Clunkers program, which was a toned-down version of the Coupons for Cars proposal this writer offered eleven months ago, I am inspired to propose a practical approach to health care reform legislation.

Most folks understand that ultimately there will be a single-payer health care system in the United States. How soon that happens is a matter of how long the financial interests which benefit from the current lack of a system can continue to terrorize American voters into believing that Change Is Bad so that the financial interests remain protected.

The financial interests have seized control of the language of the issue, introducing the phrases "Death Panel" and "Kill Granny", and using the term "Socialized Medicine" as if it were a bad thing. Duh! Getting somebody else to pay for one's medical care is the point of the whole exercise of "health care reform", and that is pretty near the definition of socialized medicine. Roadside signs have cropped up across Portage County "Wake Up America! Socialized Medicine Is At Your Door!" Indeed. Wake up, let her in, and let her start paying the cost of health care.

Time for the Good Guys to take back the language. At this point, nobody is bold enough to attack Medicare. Therefore, the Grand Compromise legislation to emerge from the various legislative proposals now in Congress, should be: "Expand Medicare". Legislation to lower the entry age for Medicare from 65 to 55 will be the important first step. This has several advantages. First, the most important advantage is that it CAN BE DONE. Not many members of Congress are going to vote against an expansion of Medicare to provide lower-cost universal coverage to the portion of their constituencies that votes in the highest proportion. This legislation CAN BE PASSED.

Second, the financial interests that have financed the lying and disruptive opposition to health care reform in general, will actually benefit from the expansion of Medicare coverage so they may not encourage their stooges to disrupt the adoption of Medicare expansion. Moving a significant part of the population aged 55 to 64 from private coverage to public coverage takes the demographic most likely to need expensive health care, off the financial institutions' books.

Third, getting the most expensive demographic off the private insurance books is an incentive for private insurance carriers, to the extent there is any competition in pricing among the carriers, to reduce their premiums. If the carriers' pool of customers is younger, intuitively that pool should be healthier, and the cost of providing coverage for medical service to that healthier pool of customers should be reduced. Some insurance carrier will break ranks with the cartel and offer lower premiums, after which the others will have to offer competitive rates or lose their business. Reducing insurance premiums might encourage employers to re-hire workers sooner, and getting more employees back on paychecks from which Medicare taxes are withheld helps pay for the cost of expanding the Medicare coverage pool.

Fourth, employers will have extra incentive to keep employees aged 55 to 64 on the payroll, with the cost of providing health insurance coverage reduced for these newly-Medicare-eligible employees. The more employees stay on payroll, the more Medicare tax is withheld to pay for all this.

Fifth, and not least, Federal employment expands. Since the Social Security Administration will have to process ten years worth of Medicare signups in the year this expansion is adopted, the SSA should hire lots of new folks with experience in processing financial forms. I understand that there is a beautiful National City Bank Tower at East Ninth Street and Euclid Avenue in Cleveland that will have office space, data-processing capacity, and experienced financial-industry employees available soon. Northern Ohio will happily accept some economic stimulus from increased Federal employment.

As Governor Strickland wisely pointed out in his remarks to the Portage County Democratic Party, we, the Democrats, have been working on universal health care since Franklin Roosevelt was President. Lyndon Johnson brought in Medicare for those over 65, after the death of John Kennedy. Let this Congress expand Medicare to those over 55, after the death of Edward Kennedy. And let some future Congress expand Medicare until it meets SCHIP, so that all Americans have access to health care.

- Christopher J. Mallin, Old Country Lawyer