

Dr. Henrie M. Treadwell

ATLANTA – The uproar at this summer’s raucous town hall meetings, Rep. Joe Wilson’s outburst in Congress and the endless debate over whether some opposition to healthcare reform is racially-tinged are a major disservice to the millions of Americans who *need* healthcare reform.

Rep. Wilson doesn’t worry about costs if a member of his family falls ill; he is covered. The majority of the people screaming and waving signs at town hall meetings don’t worry either. They are covered. Their family members walk into a doctor’s office or hospital emergency room, flash insurance cards and receive the best treatment available.

But who has been speaking on behalf of the 46 million uninsured Americans? When they get sick, there are real consequences. Do they pay the mortgage or the hospital bill? Do they buy food or save to pay for the tests that may prolong a family member’s life?

These are issues that deserve attention from our lawmakers and policymakers, not red herrings like “death panels” and purported coverage for illegal immigrants. It’s disheartening that public officials elected to serve their constituents have the audacity to play political football with something as crucial as healthcare reform. Our nation will have a serious discussion on healthcare reform only when the politicians put their constituents ahead of their desire to maneuver for political gains. What’s so disturbing is that many opponents of healthcare reform, and most assuredly many public officials, are aware of the data showing how quickly healthcare costs are rising out of control and damaging our society.

The reality is that our safety-net systems are crumbling under the cost of caring for people who are uninsured or underinsured. The working poor simply have no or limited options for providing healthcare for themselves and their families. This predicament devastates communities of color, where more than seven million African Americans are without coverage. This is not a contrived problem; rising healthcare costs are a real crisis.

So why, suddenly, must healthcare reform legislation become a budget-reduction bill?

Instead of focusing on how to obtain the best coverage possible for millions of people without insurance, the debate in Congress has been transformed into a referendum on which plan can save government the most money. This is not how it should be. When Congress was allocating billions of dollars for the war in Iraq, the focus was on how to win the war, not on how much taxpayer money could be saved.

Right now, the nation needs its leaders, President Obama and the Congress to focus on the best plan for the people, regardless of the cost. There has been much debate over whether there should be a “public option” allowing the government to offer insurance. The public option

should be considered not based on its cost, but its merit. It should be included if it can offer additional competition in the marketplace and drive down the premiums charged for other insurance plans. Now is not the time for ideological battles over government-run programs, now is the time for finding and implementing programs that work, be they government, private or hybrids. The nation needs programs that reduce the cost of insurance to consumers and cover the uninsured.

This over emphasis on costs has led to some ridiculous proposals that would ultimately be bad public policy if enacted.

Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.), for instance, has a plan mandating that all Americans purchase health insurance. Because his plan has no public option, struggling middle-class families would be forced to buy health insurance at rates likely to be difficult for them to pay.

The Kaiser Family Foundation recently released data further reinforcing why real healthcare reform must be enacted. Already, healthcare coverage for the average American family costs \$13,375 a year, and health insurance premiums increased 138 percent over the last 10 years. At that rate, many families will suffer financial hardships.

Yet, largely because of the diversionary issues used to cloud the debate, the public doesn't focus on the fact that we all pay a price when healthcare costs skyrocket. The businesses that pay the healthcare coverage for 160 million Americans must either deduct more money from employee wages or raise the price of their products or services, or in some cases, do both.

Healthcare in America is a train racing toward derailment.

When lawmakers consider the cost of a plan, they need to also consider the pain and higher cost caused by their inaction. They need to hear the voices of the 46 million people who are uninsured. They need to hear from the people with soaring medical bills.

And they need to remember that if the town hall meetings had been populated with people without insurance, they would wave signs, saying, "Help Me."

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