

***Published in the San Diego Union Tribune on September 20, 2009***

In his most recent address to Congress, President Barack Obama attempted to reset the discussion on health care reform and redefine the terms of the debate. Instead of trying to build bipartisan support for responsible reform, the president simply reiterated the same ideas to which a majority of Americans have already registered their disapproval.

In every corner of the country, Americans appear increasingly frustrated with what is clearly an attempt to impose a government-run health care system that would increase national debt levels by trillions of dollars, diminish the availability of care and result in nearly a million lost jobs. These projections are a legitimate cause for concern and should not be dismissed by proponents of a public plan as simply "scare tactics" or "misinformation," criticism that has been offered by the president himself.

The American people generally favor health care reform. What they do not support, however, is a trillion-dollar government takeover of our health care delivery system.

I have talked with county residents representing all sides of the health care debate, ranging from small business owners and retirees concerned about Medicare cuts, to hard-working families and those who are currently unemployed. Mostly everyone I have talked to believes that some form of action is necessary, a viewpoint that I strongly share. There is also agreement that every American, regardless of pre-existing conditions or other circumstances, should have affordable access to quality health care coverage.

Other areas of broad consensus include controlling costs, particularly when taking into consideration the relationship between our health care system and our economy, as well as ensuring undocumented workers are prohibited from receiving taxpayer-funded health coverage. Lastly, people want choice. They want to select their doctors and, in turn, have doctors - not un-elected bureaucrats - determine their treatments.

To get the job done, it will require a commitment to responsibly reform health care without imposing new and consistently excessive mandates or tax increases. There must also be a

willingness to clarify major points of confusion with honest discussion and, of course, incorporate outside ideas that actually serve to accomplish our collective goal of long-term health care reform.

Some of these ideas, most of which have been given little attention over the course of the health care debate, would go a long way toward reducing costs, improving access and maintaining choice. One way to limit costs and enhance competition is to increase portability by allowing consumers to purchase insurance across state lines.

We can also use the tax code to our advantage, encouraging these same consumers to buy the best plan for their needs rather than the most expensive policies. This would help people purchase cheaper but more secure coverage.

There is also good reason to make medical malpractice reform a centerpiece of health care reform. Too often, doctors practice defensive medicine to protect themselves against frivolous lawsuits. This not only leads to higher health care costs, it distracts doctors from their primary focus of healing patients.

There is still time to change the course of this discussion and refocus attention on the elements of our health care system that actually need reform. The future of our health care system - currently on an unsustainable path - depends on it.

***Hunter, a Republican, represents California's 52nd Congressional District, which includes El Cajon, Santee, La Mesa, Spring Valley, Lemon Grove, Poway, Alpine and Borrego Springs.***