

Time right for reforming health care

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Wherever you stand on health care reform, consider this: AARP, the voice of older Floridians, and the Florida Academy of Family Physicians (FAFP), the state's strongest voice for family physicians, believe now is the time for meaningful reform.

AARP and family doctors agree: It's time to fix what's wrong with our health care system, continue what's right and provide millions more Americans with high-quality, affordable coverage. It's also important that patients who choose to can keep their current insurance plans, as well as their family physicians, general internists and other primary care doctors.

Family physicians see the effects of our broken health care system every day. Too many patients are uninsured or underinsured because they can't afford coverage or they are unable to get coverage due to age or preexisting conditions.

We need coverage for all Americans. Those persons age 50 to 64, the age at which many people begin to experience health concerns, are especially vulnerable in today's economic climate. An estimated 600,000 Floridians in this age group lack coverage, and the number of Floridians who lose coverage increases by 3,500 per week.

Congressional health care reform should require insurance companies to offer plans to individuals regardless of family history or preexisting conditions. Health care reform should also guarantee that patients can renew their coverage after they've become sick.

Federal legislation should also establish that insured persons have access to primary care physicians and other primary care professionals. Unfortunately, there is a growing shortage of primary care doctors to meet that need. A reformed health care system must demonstrate it values primary care in order to encourage medical students to choose careers such as family medicine.

Further, health care reform should increase primary care payment rates under Medicare. Primary care providers must receive adequate compensation. Otherwise, they will abandon primary care for more lucrative practices.

Improving the primary health care delivery system will substantially reduce inefficiencies in the current system. Reducing waste, fraud and abuse will help protect Medicare and Medicaid so the programs will be there for our children and grandchildren.

It's also important to bring down the high cost of prescription drug coverage, especially under Medicare Part D's "doughnut hole." While the Medicare drug benefit provides coverage that for too many didn't exist before, it still exposes seniors to thousands of dollars of out-of-pocket drug costs.

Current House and Senate legislation would eliminate co-payments and deductibles for preventive care, a critical step. No one knows better than family physicians how important preventative screenings can be, yet patients still battle diseases and conditions that could have been prevented or ameliorated.

Meaningful and sustainable health care reform is possible if Congress passes legislation that gives Americans access to affordable, quality care. The best path to that goal is to make family physicians and other primary care providers the backbone of America's future health care system.