

Office Visit: Health care reform passed. Now what?

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While we continue to hear news out of our state Capitol that a group of lawmakers may challenge the constitutionality of the recently passed health care reform act, the fact of the matter is the health care bill is now law. So where do we go from here? That's a tough question for most Americans, as the majority hasn't read the more than 2,700 pages of legislation signed by the president. As a physician who is deeply interested and invested in health care reform, I saw both bad and good in the president's health care plan.

Quality of care: Let's first look at the quality of care. As I wrote in my December column, this new legislation limits the growth and expansion of physician-owned hospitals, which account for eight of the top 10 hospitals in the state of Oklahoma, according to Consumer Reports. This could ultimately limit consumers' options and their right to seek personalized, quality health care. Existing physician-owned hospitals will continue to provide lower-cost, physician-driven care with increased efficiencies and improved use of resources and technology. However, unless this part of the health care reform act is re-examined, patients lose.

Coverage of care and the cost: Although health care reform won't be completely enacted for four more years, there are some immediate changes. Prior to President Barack Obama signing the health care reform bill into law, parents could only include their children who were full-time students on their insurance policy until they were 23. Under the new legislation, young adults will now be eligible for coverage under their parent's policy until the age of 26, and it is not necessary to be a student to qualify. In addition, insurance companies will no longer be able to exclude individuals with pre-existing conditions from coverage or drop coverage for those who get sick.

By 2014, health care will be required for all Americans. If an individual does not purchase insurance, they will be fined. Medicaid will be expanded and it will become easier for people without employer coverage, including small businesses, to look for and purchase coverage. Employers with more than 50 employees will be fined if they don't offer affordable health coverage to their employees.

While the idea of everyone having health insurance sounds good on paper, will the penalties for not purchasing health insurance really persuade individuals to comply? The fine for not having insurance would be a minimum of \$695 per person per year, with exemptions for financial hardship and other special cases. The big problem here is the middle class. Families with an annual income of \$88,200 would be required to spend up to \$8,400 on insurance premiums, which could result in many families choosing to pay the penalty.

So how do we pay for it? Individuals making more than \$200,000 a year and couples making more than \$250,000 a year will face increased Medicare taxes. There also will be a Medicare tax on unearned income, including dividends, interest and capital gains. This goes into effect Jan. 1, 2013. The health care industry will also fork over their share as the pharmaceutical industry, insurance companies and medical device manufacturers help subsidize this legislation.

The most troubling aspect of paying for this legislation is the expected Medicare cuts. Over the next 10 years, government payments to Medicare Advantage will be reduced by more than \$130 billion. Physician reimbursement has recently been cut by 22 percent across the board. This legislation did not address the funding formula flaws. Medicare is essentially bankrupt, forcing the inevitable rationing of care and forcing physicians to choose whether or not to accept Medicare patients, making it harder for those patients to receive quality health care.

Americans' views of the health care reform law vary as much as the components of the law itself. I for one certainly believe everyone should have access to medical care, but I am worried we are sacrificing quality and quantity. I hope I'm wrong.

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