



JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE
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Chairman's Opening Statement

Roundtable Discussion of the Joint Economic Committee: "Reshaping the Future of America's Health" October 1, 2003

Good morning and welcome to today's roundtable discussion: "Reshaping The Future Of America's Health."

We would like to try something a little different this morning. Rather than using the traditional congressional hearing format, we will be using a roundtable approach. I want to try this approach because too often the traditional approach limits the discussion between the Members and the witnesses.

The current debate on health care is dominated by a discussion of benefits, deductibles, insurance coverage, and payment levels. The attention of policymakers has been drawn away from the most important health care issue – the actual health of the American people.

America has the pre-eminent health care system in the world. America also has the most expensive health care system in the world. Despite our pre-eminence and our spending, there are some disturbing trends emerging with serious implications for the health of the American people in the future.

The numbers are overwhelming. Obesity is epidemic in the United States. In recent years, diabetes rates among people ages 30 to 39 rose by 70 percent. We know that this year, more than 300,000 Americans will die from illnesses related to overweight and obesity.

We also know that about 46.5 million adults in the United States smoke cigarettes, even though this single behavior will result in disability and premature death for half of them.

Compounding the problem, more than 60 percent of American adults do not get enough physical activity, and more than 25 percent are not active at all.

Some groups of Americans are particularly hard hit by these disturbing trends, especially the epidemic growth in diabetes. Native Americans are two to three times more likely to have diabetes than whites. And, NIH reports that diabetes among African Americans has doubled in just 12 years.

Many of the problems I just mentioned are completely preventable. Having the pre-eminent health care system is not a replacement for a healthy lifestyle. Americans need to be responsible for their own health and prudent consumers of their own health care.

Much of current medicine is reactive, not proactive. A more proactive approach that emphasizes targeted screenings, patient education and proper follow up by medical providers can go a long way to help improve the health and productivity of the American people. However, poor preventive screening, redundant or inappropriate treatment, simple medical mistakes and lack of oversight do little but increase the cost of care.

This morning our goal is to focus on health, not just health insurance. As we examine the challenges that face Americans over the next five or ten years, there are at least two questions that must be asked: What are the major health challenges that face Americans over the next five to ten years? What are the most innovative tools available to meet these challenges?

Our roundtable discussion this morning will include the unique insight of Surgeon General Richard Carmona, who is spearheading President Bush's HealthierUS initiative. The HealthierUS initiative helps Americans to take action to become physically active, eat a nutritious diet, get preventive screenings, and make healthy choices. We are very happy the Surgeon General was able to find time to join this morning's discussion and look forward to hearing his thoughts on these vital issues.

We are also pleased to have Mr. Jim Oatman, currently Senior Vice President of FortisHealth. He is here to elaborate on initiatives the insurance industry is taking to promote healthy lifestyles and keep down costs. Many insurance plans and employers, including FortisHealth, have taken a "carrot and stick" approach to encouraging beneficiaries to exercise, quit smoking or follow doctor's orders while monitoring chronic illness. Some companies reduce premiums, increase interest rates on health care savings accounts, or give away free gym equipment as rewards for healthier lifestyles. Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Tommy Thompson met with FortisHealth and other insurers in July to persuade them to find ways to reduce the public cost of treating America's obesity epidemic.

We are also very pleased to have Dr. Diane Rowland of the Kaiser Family Foundation. Dr. Rowland is a nationally recognized expert on Medicaid and the uninsured. Like physical inactivity or cigarette smoking, the lack of health care coverage is also a risk factor for long-term health problems. We look forward to Dr. Rowland's insights on the particular problems facing lower income Americans and those without access to health insurance.

We welcome each witness's thoughts on the challenges facing health care today. I want to thank Ranking Member Stark for his interest and help in organizing this hearing and in bringing these distinguished experts before the Committee. I ask all of you to join me in a bipartisan spirit as we engage in this important task.

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