

If I Were Obama's Health Care Speech Writer

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I think the health care reform debate is going to dead end unless we re-frame the language and the approach. Health care reform will be about winning the hearts and mind of the American people, and that will not be done by using buzz words and Beltway policy lingo. As I was walking home this week, I wondered what I would say if I were Obama's health care speech writer. And, this is what emerged:

Hello. I want to talk with you today about my vision for health care in America. We are at an historic juncture in this country. We have the opportunity of having meaningful health care reform or we can resume the old fights about how to pay for health care that have always doomed reform in the past. The debate has never been what a health care system could do for the people of this great country. It has only revolved around who is going to run it and how are we going to pay for it. If we go down this same road, we will fail again. I don't like to fail and we as a nation must not fail to reform this fractured health care system. Over the next several weeks I will cover a range of issue and ideas.

So, today, I invite you to join me in a new conversation. I will problem solve with you to find common ground and build consensus on some key elements BEFORE we decide how to pay for the new system. I learned in my campaign when talking to the people of this country, that we are a tolerant people who can handle complicated problems. Americans want to learn and participate in a meaningful way in issues that face their families and their communities. Now is the time to tap into this wonderful American ingenuity, as has recently been started with the thousands of health care meetings around the country last Saturday.

If we start with a problem solving approach, then all the stakeholders can show what they can add to the system and where they bring value. If we problem solve together we can start to become more of a team than adversaries. We can learn from each other and find common ground where we think none exists.

I would like to start this new health care reform debate by focusing first on a few key deeply held American values: fair play, opportunity, choice, accountability, and responsibility. We are a practical people who can problem solve together. We've gotten to the moon, invented penicillin and fought a war on two fronts and won, even with the majority of our Navy leveled in Pearl Harbor. I would submit that health care reform is not rocket science. It has just become so entrenched in the same old tired arguments that we no longer listen to each other or to new ideas.

I decided to take on health care now because we must have this new conversation. We will structure this debate like we managed our campaign. We won't indulge in negative advertising. We know you are disgusted with negative advertising campaigns that distort facts and use scare tactics rather than reason.

Are you ready for this new conversation? (pause while the audience says yes or claps).

Great!

So, if we started with a principle of fair play in health care, what would that look like? Well, first, we would have access to care and access to the same basic benefit package regardless of where we worked

or our income. Do you think we can do this? Sure we can. But, because Americans value choice, we can still buy more benefits if we want to and have a range of plans to choose from. That's fair.

We need to make sure no one is bankrupted by health care costs. It is only fair we protect our people.

If we all had the same basic benefit package, we could take any job we wanted or work for ourselves without fear of losing benefits or getting insurance in the future. That's fair. This also offers small employers opportunity since they could offer health care benefits as well, which many small employers cannot do now. That's fair. This is not an idle issue. Over 50% of all Americans work in companies with 50 or fewer employees. This is an economic stimulus issue as well as one of a level playing field.

Our health care premiums must not be tied to the state of our health. That's not fair. We can find an equitable way of paying for health premiums. Right now our premiums are based on our health, our age, in many cases our gender, and sometimes where we live. Now that is really not fair.

Now do you see where I am going with this? Are you still with me? (Pause for yes or applause)
Good.

Now, since we want our health care system to be accountable, what would that look like? Well, for starters, we would have the health plans accountable to us for the quick and accurate processing of claims rather than the delay and deny tactics that happen too often now. We already do this for federal employees. The insurance company's profits are tied to its performance. Isn't that accountability?

What would accountability look like if you are a health care professional? You would be accountable to your patients and your colleagues by being up to date on the most effective treatment options. If we had an accountable health system, health plans would make sure our doctors could easily receive the latest, state of the art quality care guidelines published by the professional medical societies.

If we had an accountable health plan, then we as patients would need to pay attention to our health and the health of our family, just as I have quit smoking and President Clinton has given up juicy, charbroiled hamburgers. This is hard. But, it is not impossible.

If we had an accountable health system, we would want to know more about the treatment options that are offered to us. I just learned the other day, for example, that in the greater Seattle area, there is a huge 3 to 40% variation in care for the delivery of babies. Yes. Normal deliveries. I mean how many centuries have women been having babies, and yet, today, we see a nearly 50% difference in how women are treated in a city with some of the best health care in the country. Huge variations in care occur across the country. One small town in Texas has the lowest income per capita and the highest health care costs per capita in the nation. Care decisions have more to do with where a doctor went to school and lives than the care standards developed by their profession.

If we added efficiency as a value, then we would all have electronic medical records.

I am not going to dodge the cost issue. We must rein in costs. They're staggering and killing our economy and busting family budgets. There are basically three ways to pay for health care. Tax based health care that is managed by the federal government along the lines of Medicare. Or, you as an individual pay for your insurance yourself, like automobile insurance. Or, we can all participate as we do now with shared responsibility in the payment and management using a private insurance market, like we have for federal employees: everyone pays—employers, employees, and offer public programs for the low income and elderly.

The fact of the matter is, we can figure out how to pay for what we want, but first we must define what we want. So, starting today and over the course of the next two months, let's talk together about what elements need to be included that will meet our tests of those values we Americans hold most dear: fair play, opportunity, choice, accountability, and responsibility.

I believe that by working and learning together we can build an American health system for the 21st century. And we will be a better and healthier nation for it.

Thank you and good night.

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