

## News in Brief

### US ELECTION 2008: HEALTH CARE REFORM AND THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

The editors of *New England Journal of Medicine* asked Senator John McCain, the Republican presidential nominee, and Senator Barack Obama, the Democratic presidential nominee, to describe their plans for reforming the U.S. health care system. Their statements follow.

#### *Senator John McCain – Access to Quality and Affordable Health Care for Every American*

Senator McCain states that there is a challenge in protecting and improving the care that hospitals deliver, while increasing the availability and affordability of health insurance for Americans. He believes that the way to accomplish this is by letting doctors and patients make healthcare decisions, rather than by government bureaucracy. The first step is in restoring the doctor-patient relationship.

The fundamental problems in the health care system are those of cost and access. Rising costs affect everyone – those who are insured need to pay more, those who are uninsured find it even harder to afford. He proposes an approach to lowering costs and reforming the healthcare system with a focus on four points. Firstly, each American family should have the choice of coverage it needs. Secondly, promote research and technology on improving quality. Thirdly, there is a need for competitive prices in the health care sector so as to lower costs for consumers. Lastly, health insurance should be portable and have increased coverage.

He recognises the impact of chronic diseases, and the need for better general education, so as to effect lifestyle modifications from young to prevent the onset of these debilitating conditions. Technology should be used to disseminate information on current “best practices” to keep every physician up to date.

Access to health insurance must also be improved. He plans to replace the tax exclusion of the value of health insurance from employees’ taxable compensation with a new refundable tax credit of \$2,500 for individuals and \$5,000 for families. This may be used to continue employment-based insurance, or to find a more suitable plan. The benefit is that each individual and each family is in control, which should increase competition among insurance companies.

He also seeks to strengthen the doctor-patient relationship so that there is greater trust between doctor and patient, such that a doctor would not be performing unnecessary tests to protect himself from potential lawsuits. True reformation comes only when this relationship is improved, so that American families have more choices for high-quality and affordable care.

#### *Senator Barack Obama - Modern Health Care for All Americans*

Senator Obama felt that increasing uncompensated care loads, administrative rules and insurers’ coverage decisions are inappropriately influencing the practice of medicine today in the United States. His plan to reform the healthcare system into a “high quality, affordable medical care” has three tenets. First, all Americans should have access to

the benefits of modern medicine. Second, waste that plagues the medical system such as “layers of bureaucracy that serve no purpose” and doctors providing unnecessary care for fear of being sued should be eliminated. Third, a public health infrastructure emphasising prevention of disease and improvement of health is needed.

His plan will offer a choice of affordable health insurance plans. People without

employment-based insurance will have a choice of private insurance policies at rates similar to those offered through large firms. A new public-plan option will be provided to patients so as to promote competition among insurers. To make insurance affordable, families will be given income-related tax credits. Insurance programmes for children will also be expanded. These will be paid by cutting out waste in the system and redirecting tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans to help middle-class families afford health insurance. His plan calls for investing \$10 billion per year over 5 years in health information technology and to provide necessary and critical technical support for physicians in addition to the financial aspect.

He opined that payment reform should improve patient outcomes and lower overall costs by removing incentives for unnecessary care and “rewarding the right care, provided at the right time, for the right reasons”. He voted against the recent reduction in physician payments as he felt that doctors should be paid fairly, and health reform should not be started

by penalising doctors. He intends to develop an independent national institute to work with the medical community to evaluate and disseminate information on the comparative effectiveness of drugs, devices, treatments and procedures. He will invest in programmes, including loan repayment, training grants and improved provider reimbursement, to give young doctors incentives to enter primary care. The issue of medical malpractice will be addressed with the central goal of preventing medical errors in the first place by providing information and decision-support technology and other patient-safety initiatives to physicians.

Finally, he will work with State and local governments to create a coherent and coordinated national public health strategy. Patients, employers and communities will be encouraged to have a role in helping to start out healthy and maintain health through individual efforts as well as various health-promotion and prevention initiatives. ■

*(Source: The New England Journal of Medicine website.  
<http://content.nejm.org/cgi/reprint/359/15/1537.pdf>)*