



'Righteous anger' on health care

By Tom Blakey

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— Those who attended Thursday night's town hall meeting in Noble on health care reform -- approximately 40 area residents, six legislators and numerous physicians, nurses and other health care providers -- were in agreement: Oklahoma's health care system needs a makeover.

"Insurance reform is a moral issue," said Rep. Eric Proctor, D-Tulsa. "Until we have righteous anger and get outraged, nothing will change."

Proctor said people "have to get to the point where they demand medical coverage as a moral issue."

Sen. Kenneth Corn, D-Poteau, said "health care is a right and not something that should be afforded."

Oklahoma's health care system "is a broken system in need of reform," he said.

Corn said legislative rules prevent legislators from making changes to the insurance companies.

"From the very beginning they set up rules that protect the insurance companies from reform..."

Corn said it only takes one legislator to roadblock legislation by asking for a "financial analysis."

"I think it's unconstitutional," he said. "It's alarming to me the insurance companies have that kind of lobby. It's undemocratic and unfortunate for the state of Oklahoma."

Corn said he successfully amended HB 1055 to make it unlawful for an insurance company to pay bonuses as an incentive to get employees to cancel policies rather than pay claims. The Senate passed the bill, but the leader of the House sent the bill to conference.

The Legislature needs to "quit letting the House dictate to the Senate what can be done" regarding insurance reform, he said.

Rep. Wallace Collins, D-Norman, said he also had problems getting health care reforms through the Legislature, and had attempted to expand the autism bill, legislation which mandates insurance companies provide coverage of treatment for autistic children.

"The situation is, in either house, one person has the power to kill a bill," he said.

Collins said his amendment "was killed by a single individual."

"It's a sad day when the Legislature doesn't operate democratically -- but it doesn't," he said.

Sen. John Sparks, D-Norman said a bill he was pushing, addressing gaps in ambulance service in rural areas, was "roadblocked" and sent through committee four times.

"We'll be continuing to work on passing it in the next legislative session -- and we should," he said.

Much of the discussion targeted private health insurance companies and drug manufacturing companies that concentrate on maximizing profits instead of providing quality health care.

The drug companies have fought for years to keep cheaper, generic versions of their drugs off the market, said representatives of Oklahomans for Health Care Reform, the nonpartisan organization that sponsored the town hall meeting.

Insurance companies often deny coverage due to preexisting conditions, many people said.

Dr. Renee McNall, an Oklahoma City pediatric oncologist who facilitated the discussion, said her son had strep throat, and her insurance company denied her insurance claim saying his sore throat was "a pre-existing condition."

"I know of an insurance company that wouldn't pay for my taking out a gall stone, saying the gall bladder was a pre-existing condition," she said.

A woman in the audience who identified herself as a nurse active at the World Trade Center at the time of the

bombing, said she was told by her insurance company that her pleurisy "was my problem and not a covered expense."

The woman said she had to pay for the drugs used to treat the yeast infections she incurred from taking antibiotics.

"They told me the meds were not covered because I didn't get (the yeast infection) at the World Trade Center," she said.

A woman in the audience said she thought it "disgraceful a city like Oklahoma City never put together an outreach program for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder."

Rep. Joe Dorman, D-Rush Springs, whose district includes Fort Sill's army community, said 25 percent of the soldiers returning from Iraq need help for PTSD.

"Oklahoma has no in-patient facility," he said. "I'm working with the feds to get one."

McNall said an interim study was conducted, and the "Department of Mental Health said there are too many requests (for PTSD treatment) and not enough funds."

Another woman in the audience asked: "Do we have to wait on the feds to deal with (the issue of) pre-existing conditions?"

Corn replied: "I don't think the Legislature has the courage to deal with it."

Corn said Oklahomans need to quit being the laughingstock of the nation on matters of health care.

"We don't have to be the last horse out of the gate," he said.

Corn said when the Patient's Bill of Rights was defeated in the Senate, he looked in the rear of the Senate Chamber, where "those who were opposed to it were literally high-fiving each other."

Scott Martin, R-Norman, told those at Truth Church, where the town meeting was held, that he was "concerned health care would not be a major issue of debate" when he was elected to the House.

"We've spent lots of time discussing health care issues," he said.

Martin said the Legislature had taken "a big step" by expanding Insure Oklahoma, the public-private partnership which provides subsidized employer-based coverage for working adults, along with a public product for eligible adults without access to employer coverage.

Martin said the Legislature passed the Autism Bill, increased the physical education training requirements for children and could look forward to stimulus funds for health care improvements.

"A large chunk of the \$2.6 billion that Oklahoma gets will go toward health and human services," he said.

Martin said legislators need to embrace the stem cell debate and "not run from it."

"There are certain other options we need to explore as an open door to health care for all Oklahomans," he said.

Tom Blakey 366-3540 tblakey@normantranscript.com

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