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Code Blue: Can we save the health care system? - Introduction

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Introduction

“We now face an opportunity – and an obligation – to turn the page on the failed politics of yesterday’s health care debates. It’s time to bring together businesses, the medical community and members of both parties around a comprehensive solution to this crisis, and it’s time to let the drug and insurance industries know that while they’ll get a seat at the table, they don’t get to buy every chair ... The very first promise I made on this campaign was that, as president, I will sign a universal health care plan into law by the end of my first term in office.”

– President Barack Obama, University of Iowa, May 29, 2007

According to the most recent available government data, which dates back to 2007, 46 million Americans under age 65, the age of Medicare entitlement, are without health insurance. The number today is much higher, because the rate of unemployment has risen dramatically in the past two years and, for most people, health insurance is tied to employment. However, employment does not necessarily mean health insurance coverage. Each year, as premiums increase, fewer employers offer health insurance as an employee benefit. Some employers reduce the percentage of their premium contribution, making coverage unaffordable for eligible workers, or use part-time or contract employees who are not entitled to coverage. Eighty percent of the uninsured are native or naturalized citizens.

Expenses associated with sudden illness cannot be postponed like the purchase of a new car or clothes. Consequently, millions of Americans constantly face looming financial disaster. People of all ages are unable to afford basic health care that might help prevent catastrophic and costly illness. Fifty percent of the uninsured children in our nation do not receive a well-child check-up annually. The mortality rate for the uninsured is substantially higher than for the insured, and they are far more likely to be hospitalized for an avoidable condition.

National health care costs are approaching \$3 trillion annually, account for five percent of the gross national product, and are estimated to amount to 12 percent of the gross national product by 2050, according to the Congressional Budget Office. In his address to a joint session of Congress on Feb. 24, President Obama named health care one of the three most important issues facing the nation.

The country watches with great interest as the Obama administration brings together labor and management, the medical community, health care insurers, consumers, pharmaceutical companies and others to see if a solution is possible, knowing that past efforts at reforming the health care system have resulted in dismal failure. Have we reached a point where necessity will force reform? Can our nation’s legislators put aside partisan interests and forge a reform bill that is truly in the best interests of our citizens?

The Arlin M. Adams Center for Law and Society at Susquehanna University is pleased to present a two-day symposium examining the critical issues surrounding the health care debate. Its goal is to improve public understanding so that the audience may make informed decisions about whether our health care system can be saved and, if so, what needs to be done to save it.