

Postscript

by David Kendall and S. Robert Levine, MD

Governing the ungovernable health system

A universal health care system has been a key progressive goal since Theodore Roosevelt's day. In 1994, the quest for comprehensive reform once again rose to the top of the nation's agenda, only to collapse under pressure from partisan conflict, skepticism toward the proposed role for government, and an overly complex blueprint for change. What will it take to get the job done at last?

Strong leadership. By early 2000, both Vice President Gore and Sen. Bradley had demonstrated their commitment to making reform happen. The Republican presidential candidates had not yet proposed systemic reform or a major expansion of health care insurance but had recognized health care as a priority for voters.

Bipartisanship. In an era of divided government, progress is possible only if the two political parties stop indulging their ideological extremes and find common ground. The best starting point for an agreement is a tax credit for the uninsured because it already has bipartisan support in Congress.

Step-by-step reform. As the abortive 1994 health care debate showed, reform should not be attempted in one fell swoop. But neither should we be satisfied with progress around the margins. The series of large steps laid out in this BLUEPRINT will culminate in a universal system in which all Americans have access to, and take responsibility for securing, their health care coverage and long-term care insurance.

Public support. Each step of reform as well as its final goal must make sense to people. Penn's Poll shows broad public support for change — including far-reaching reforms like requiring all Americans to have health insurance.

Minimal disruption. Health care reform must respect the fact that most people are happy with their current coverage and doctor. That means, for instance, that we should supplement, not replace, job-based coverage, giving people the option of buying their own insurance if they choose. Those without employer-based insurance should be enabled to play on a level playing field, with

equivalent tax treatment of coverage costs and access to group purchasing power.

Fiscal discipline. As the demand for health care grows, we must promote the most efficient use of finite health care resources. The unique opportunity presented by growing budget surpluses should not be squandered on health care that produces little bang for the buck. Achieving the full value of health care requires continuous innovation, new research to determine what interventions are effective, and consumer responsibility.

Consumer empowerment. Health care reform should empower consumers, not institutions. For too long, the government has merely arbitrated fights between competing groups: doctors, managed care companies, lawyers, hospitals, etc. Real consumer empowerment means giving consumers more control of their health care purchasing power, more information, and more choices.

Self-governance. America's vast health care economy — \$1.1 trillion — is too complex and too dynamic for the government alone to solve all problems. No central authority can single-handedly manage health care in the Information Age. Instead, government must level the playing field and help create the framework in which an empowered consumer and an open marketplace can create value

and quality for everyone. Rather than trying to legislate incremental fixes, the government must enhance the system's self-adaptive capacity by producing new knowledge, facilitating information sharing, building communities of support, and connecting people with resources. A good example of bringing together diverse groups around a common purpose is the imaginatively-spelled Vvaleo initiative supported by the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Derived from a Latin word meaning "to be in good health," Vvaleo has the potential to solve many systemic problems, including the challenge of making medical records highly secure yet easily available to those who need them, including patients. ■

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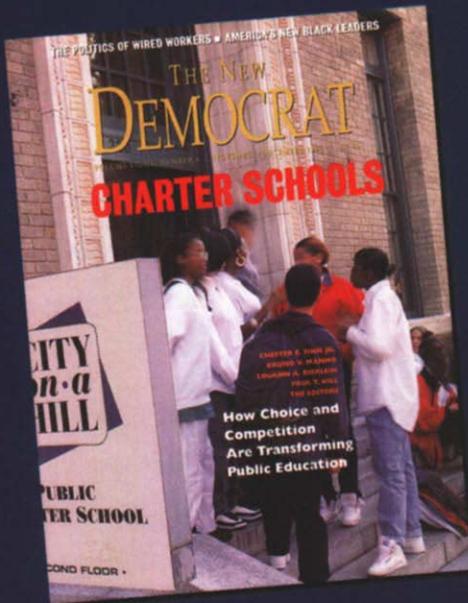
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