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GUEST COLUMN: National health care reform affects us all

GHS

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Most Americans are concerned about the rising cost of health care, eroding health benefits, and rising health insurance costs. While a majority of Americans, and nearly all Massachusetts residents, have access to health care, it seems as though we keep paying more, but getting less care.

Only 10 years from now, if nothing is done at the national level, Americans can expect to pay 68 percent more than at present for health insurance and out-of-pocket costs of health care.

Women, especially in a deteriorating economy, are more likely to be adversely affected by the cost of health care.

There is also a significant and growing group of our fellow Americans who have no health insurance, have inadequate benefits, or who are worried that if they lose their job, they will lose their benefits. Estimates suggest that the number of uninsured in the United States will grow from the current 46 million to 65.7 million people by 2019 - 10 years from now.

How health care is reformed nationally should be of direct interest and concern to all of us, especially to Massachusetts where significant reforms are already being implemented, with 97.4 percent of our people already covered.

The U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate are now working feverishly to mark up health reform bills over the next few weeks that, if successfully reconciled and enacted into law, will make health care more affordable and reduce the cost of care.

Everyone - individuals, families, employers, taxpayers, health care professionals, insurers - has an important stake in the outcome of the growing debate. It is President Barack Obama's top domestic legislative priority.

We know from the media that the Obama administration and congressional leaders have made a very public commitment to build on the existing employer-based insurance system.

The president has promised that those of us who like our health coverage and who like our current health care provider are likely to be able to keep that coverage and that provider. We can also expect that the costs might not rise as fast and the quality of care will remain or improve if the new law includes many of the provisions that are under consideration on Capitol Hill in Washington.

The principles under discussion are: coverage for all; right care at the right time in the right place; insurance market reform; and individual coverage mandate; determining how to pay for the cost of reform; and the possibility of a public option for providing affordable insurance.

The specifics of the national health care reform bill are still not finalized given the many, often-competing ideas under consideration.

Congress is working to have proposals from each branch finalized by the end of July to be negotiated in conference committee during August and September.

All of us in Massachusetts hope that it succeeds in ways that complement the progress we've made and, perhaps, provides additional resources to support the steps we've taken. We certainly hope that it also strengthens and hastens our efforts to improve health care quality and safety, and to reduce costs and wasteful practices. A very hopeful bi-partisan proposal presented by the Brookings Institution also has advanced the idea of a comparative effectiveness institute to make sure that medical procedures being used on us reflect the best and latest scientific research.

The Massachusetts Senate has established a special committee to follow the unfolding debate on national health reform and to guide our congressional delegation as they work on this important policy.

The special committee will hold informational meetings with experts on our Massachusetts plan and how it could be complemented or harmed by provisions under consideration in Congress.

We will, then, be better able to advise our state's congressional delegation, especially those who along with Sen. Edward Kennedy and his staff, are working directly on committees with jurisdiction over various components of the national reform plan. Every citizen can become informed about national health reform through the media. Those who want to follow the developments at the national level can also do so through www.healthreform.gov.

State Sen. Richard T. Moore is the chairman of the Special Senate Committee on National Health Reform. He was helped develop the landmark Massachusetts Health Reform Law (Chapter 58 of the Acts of 2006) and the Health Care Quality Improvement and Cost Containment Law (Chapter 305 of the Acts of 2008).