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⌘ OPINIONS & LETTERS TO THE EDITOR online print edition



Current health system wasteful, cruel

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I welcome the Arizona Town Hall's conclusion that the best way to fix our broken health care system is through "universal coverage." ("Table set for health care debate," *Republic*, April 27).

While legislative duties prevented me from attending the town hall, I found myself nodding in agreement with its conclusions.

If 18 percent of the people in this state cannot obtain health insurance, then more than 1 million Arizona residents can't afford to see a doctor. This forces them to ignore illness until it becomes a costly crisis, and that adds to costs that all of us must bear. Here is why:

When the uninsured finally do seek medical help, their minor illnesses have become a full-blown health crisis. Since they can't simply see a doctor, they're forced to use the most expensive component of our health care system, the hospital emergency room.

This creates a financial catastrophe for their families and adds billions of dollars to public costs in the form of lost wages and productivity.

And then, since federal law prevents hospitals from turning away the uninsured, the bills for emergency room and follow-up treatment typically go unpaid and are passed on in the form of higher health care costs. This is why health care expenses rise faster than the overall inflation rate, and this is why each year, anyone lucky enough to have insurance experiences rising premiums, more deductibles and less coverage.

In addition, our current system encourages some employers to shift health care costs onto taxpayers. A March 2006 study by the University of California-Berkeley indicated that here in Arizona, more than 2,700 Wal-Mart employees turn to the state for health care because they can't get it from their employer. Nationwide, this "Wal-Mart Tax" is costing the public \$1.4 billion a year.

Wal-Mart isn't the only employer that shifts health care expenses onto the public tax burden, but they are the largest. This creates an unfair advantage over responsible companies that cover their employees, and as I've explained, it raises everyone's health care burden.

This situation can only be fixed through a universal health insurance system. For two years I have sought legislative action, only to see the issue ignored by the House majority.

My bill develops a system, a public-private partnership, to insure all Arizona residents within three years. It combines the best aspects of government programs with private insurance very similar to our well-regarded Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System. Health care providers would not be forced to accept lower payments, and we could all obtain treatment when we need it.

Our existing system is wasteful, cruel and foolish. It's wasteful because \$3 out of every \$10 spent on health care is consumed by paperwork and needless red tape. It's cruel because it encourages people to avoid preventive care and suffer until they become costly medical emergencies. And it's foolish because there is a better way.

At least two separate initiatives are being prepared for Arizona's 2008 ballot.

Either one could well attract significant public support. We can fix the system through the legislative process, providing everyone with a voice in drafting a reform, or we can wait to see these initiatives, and hope they hit all the right points.

The writer is a state representative from Tucson and is House minority leader.