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Ask candidates to address chronic disease crisis

Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease in Iowa

A little over a year from now, we will elect a new president. On Election Day, based on current averages, more than 1,100 Americans will have a limb amputated as a result of their diabetes. Before we take the former action, we, as patients and voters, need to demand what those who seek public office plan to do about the latter.

In the days we have between now and next year's elections, a national health-care debate needs to take place. We need to know what aspiring office holders plan to do about our daunting — and that's putting it mildly — future challenges.

Almost one of every two voters who goes to the polls next November will have at least one chronic disease. Those illnesses include diabetes, heart disease, cancer or COPD, to give a few examples. If projections from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are correct, this will be the healthiest electorate we'll see in some time. Chronic disease rates are projected to escalate significantly, affecting our society, our health-care system and our economy.

The ramifications of this growing health-care crisis affect us in multiple ways. Let's take, for example, the costs that we pay. Since the year 2000, premiums for employer-sponsored health insurance plans have increased by roughly 90 percent. These price increases have, in large part, been driven by the cost of treating chronic disease. Coverage costs for people with chronic illnesses average over \$6,000 yearly, five times higher than for those without those conditions. Low-income patients are especially hard hit by these increases, which leave them less money for healthy food, YMCA memberships and other steps that could prevent many of these chronic diseases in the first place.

If our physicians and hospitals have to keep treating more people with chronic diseases, these costs are going to keep spiraling upward, making health care increasingly unaffordable, not to mention exacerbating the physician and nursing shortages we're already witnessing in some regions of the country. Today, one in every 10 of us has diabetes. By the middle of this century, that ratio will have worsened to one in every three. This will be devastating for our society and will likely make our health-care systems financially unsustainable.

This dire future is not cast in stone. We can stake steps to improve popula-

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tion health and prevent these projected disease escalation rates. To date, we haven't been asking our political leaders and candidates what they plan to do to address the chronic disease crisis. We need to start, immediately.

Here's one example of an issue that should be raised in candidate debates. The Medicare program, according to its trustees, will be in financial insolvency 15 years from now. More than 65 percent of Medicare beneficiaries have multiple chronic illnesses, requiring billions of dollars in collective treatment costs. Experts have said that Medicare is not doing everything it can or should to prevent these diseases or to address obesity

among seniors, which leads to higher disease rates. What would politicians do to make Medicare beneficiaries healthier and, in so doing, make the program more financially viable for future generations?

And there's another issue that requires more thought and discussion than we've seen. We've witnessed a good deal of controversy over drug prices, but little attention given to the significant progress being made on cures and improved therapies for cancer, diabetes and Alzheimer's. We should hear what positions candidates would advocate to accelerate biopharmaceutical breakthroughs and the hope they represent for those afflicted with serious illnesses.

Plus, greater political attention needs to be paid to our societal health and, specifically, our rising obesity rate. President John F. Kennedy dared us to see a man on the moon. Surely, the next president can encourage more Americans to be able to see their toes. How would the next president use both policy levers and the bully pulpit to bring about a healthier nation?

These are just a few of the issues and questions that require greater attention. Between now and next year's Election Day, we expect to learn a good deal more about the men and women who seek to lead us. A debate over the more important health-care issues facing our nation must be part of that process.

This essay was written by the co-chairs of the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease in Iowa: Cathy Glasson, president of SEIU Local 199; Jim Henter, president of the Iowa Retail Federation; Sherri Nielsen, president & CEO of Easter Seals Iowa; the Rev. Sarai Schnucker Rice, executive director of the Des Moines Area Religious Council. Contact: iowa@fightchronicdisease.org