

Where do candidates stand on health care?

by Steve Elliott, Dian Palmer, Brandon Scholz and Arthur Taggart

There are a number of important issues percolating in our political debates — terrorism, job creation, the Supreme Court, to name a few — but we are concerned that health care hasn't been as prominent as it should be on that list. In the months before Election Day, we need and deserve a comprehensive health care debate in this country, one that tells us where the candidates for Congress and the presidency stand on ensuring our long-term health and well-being.

Of course, some will say we already had that debate over the Affordable Care Act. This is different. The debate we need is not strictly about our health insurance system, but rather the broader and more personal issue of how we stay healthy and free of disease.

In Wisconsin today, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than half of our citizens have at least one chronic illness like heart disease, cancer or diabetes. Thousands of our friends, neighbors and family members have more than one of these serious health conditions. And this problem is projected to get much worse. Research shows, for example, that one of every three citizens in our states will have hypertension by the year 2025 and nearly 10 percent will be diabetic.

This is, without question, a public policy issue and raises critical questions that our prospective government leaders need to answer. The fact is that many chronic diseases are preventable and there are many factors involved in achieving improved population health. Better use of preventive health care, improvements in biopharmaceutical

therapies, steps to elevate population health by addressing problems like obesity and tobacco use ... these are essential in reshaping our future so that we're not, as is the case today, spending 86 cents of every health care dollar to treat patients dealing with chronic disease.

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To bring these issues to the forefront, we formed the Wisconsin chapter of the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease, an organization of patients, health care providers, community organizations, employers and labor groups dedicated to reversing these destructive and avoidable health trends. In the months ahead, we're going to be asking those aspiring to public office how they plan to address these vitally important issues.

For example, we currently have a health care system that devotes virtually all of its resources toward the treatment of diseases after symptoms have already exacerbated. How do we shift that system to one that

focuses on diagnosis, early treatment and prevention, utilizing dollars to keep people healthy?

And, more specifically, we know from a study that appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that only 60 percent of us receive recommended preventive care. Obviously, the Affordable Care Act was designed for all Americans to receive quality health care, but that is clearly not yet happening. How will candidates propose to change or improve the law so that people are getting the preventive checkups and diagnostic care they need?

And whether we have a future that involves more effective treatments and even cures for today's chronic diseases is heavily dependent upon sound political decision-making. As candidates tell us how they want to curb the cost of health care, they also need to explain how they will ensure the flow of research dollars to achieve the biopharmaceutical breakthroughs that will save and extend lives.

There are a number of questions that need to be raised and answered. And this conversation needs to occur now so that we have time to change a current course that will see too many lives affected by serious illness.

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