Demand health care details from candidates

Even after Floridians get a breather from the nonstop intensity of the presidential primary, we should never forget the important role this state will play all the way up to November in determining who will lead this nation for the next four years. It has become an axiom that you can't get to the White House without winning the Sunshine State, and we need to take full advantage of that fact in shaping the debate between now and Election Day.

For starters, we need to demand more details from the presidential candidates on health care. More than half of Floridians have at least one serious chronic illness like heart disease, cancer or diabetes. An unacceptably high percentage of the population is headed toward a future spent in hospital beds and emergency rooms. That's a future we can and should prevent.

That's why the time is now to raise these issues with those who want to be president and serve our interests in Congress. To make sure that happens, we have just launched a Florida chapter of the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease. PFCD is an organization comprised of health care providers, patient advocacy organizations, community groups, labor and business organizations. Its purpose is to raise awareness of the growing problem posed by these severe illnesses and to press for sensible, effective solutions.

To succeed, we need to make optimal use of these months between now and Election Day and press the candidates for public office to engage in a conversation about population health.

We also need to focus on medications from a couple of different perspectives. First, it's a simple and distressing fact that too many people who need prescription drugs for their health conditions aren't getting them. Research shows that medicines are being prescribed only about two-thirds as often as a patient's illness would dictate. This needs to change if we are to successfully transform a health care system in which 86 cents of every dollar is being spent to treat patients with chronic illnesses.

Candidates also need to share their views on the future of biopharmaceutical and medical progress. In the last five years alone, we have seen tremendous progress in the development of new breakthrough treatments for diseases that have afflicted humankind for generations. Will the federal government implement policies that sustain and even accelerate these advances or will we slow down the pursuit of improved therapies and cures through greater regulatory activity and price controls?

One thing is for certain. If we stay with the status quo, more Floridians are going to have diabetes. More will experience the pain of cancer. We will see a greater number of lives shortened by heart disease. We can and must change this future. And we should start by using Florida's political leverage to demand answers and solutions from our candidates.

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