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DONNA E. SWEET: U.S. SPENDING MORE, GETTING LESSER CARE

BY DONNA E. SWEET

Americans like to think that we are the best at everything, often deservedly so. But when it comes to health care, too many of us -- including many Kansans -- are not getting the care we need.

In January, the American College of Physicians, representing 125,000 internal medicine physicians and medical student members, published a report comparing U.S. health care with care in 12 other democratic, industrialized countries. Here are the sobering facts:

- The United States spends more on health care than anyone else, almost \$6,400 per person in 2005. Other countries spend about half as much.
- Higher spending might be justified if it also brought better access. Instead, with 47 million uninsured people, the United States is last in providing access to care.
- More spending does not lead to better quality. The United States ranks below other industrialized countries in providing patients with safe care and in helping them maintain healthy lives. One recent study found that more than 100,000 Americans died in 2002 from causes that could have been prevented if health care in the United States was as good as in the countries with the best-performing systems.

We can't import other countries' systems to the United States, but we can learn from them. Countries with better quality and lower costs have two features lacking here:

First, everyone is covered for essential health care services. In some countries, the government is the principal source of funding for health care. In others, a combination of government programs and private insurance is used to provide coverage to everyone.

Second, when patients have regular access to a primary care doctor, their costs are lower and health outcomes are better.

In the United States, by contrast, the number of uninsured persons is rising, and young physicians, saddled with an average student debt of \$150,000, are choosing financially lucrative specialty careers over primary care. In one recent survey, only 19 percent of third-year medical students reported that they planned to go into the primary care fields of general internal medicine, family medicine or pediatrics.

In Kansas, 11 percent of our population is uninsured, and our state ranked 31st among states in the number of physicians per population. The number of Kansans 65 or older -- the people most in need of a primary care physician -- is projected to grow 46 percent between 2000 and 2020. The number of new primary care physicians won't keep pace.

In this election year, the uninsured are getting some discussion from the candidates, but we are a long way from a political consensus on how to cover everyone. Regrettably, the presidential candidates are not proposing measures to assure there will be enough primary care doctors to take care of an aging population with more chronic illnesses.

High-quality, accessible health care should not be viewed as a particularly Democratic or Republican issue, but something that every one of us should expect.

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