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Health care forum draws quiet group

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COCOA -- No high-decibel rants. No breach of decorum. No banner-waving groups outside.

Inside an auditorium Thursday night at Brevard Community College, about 50 people listened to a group of six panelists, trying to educate themselves on the state of health care in the United States as the debate over reform rages.

Thursday's audience consisted mostly of senior citizens, including 72-year-old Merritt Island resident John Kaufmann.

He said he became passionate about health care after his wife recently was misdiagnosed. The retired construction worker has attended health care forums from Orlando to Melbourne.

"I wanted to hear a civil debate where it would be open and discussed," Kaufmann said. "It's a debate you have to have whether you like it or not."

The speakers Thursday night included a local pharmacist, an insurance broker, an attorney, two doctors and a small-business owner.

Cocoa Beach resident Tony Sasso, a former state representative, moderated the forum. Panelists took turns answering pre-selected questions that addressed issues such as escalating medical costs and issues related to technology.

Terry Singleton, owner of Beacon Enterprises Inc., an employee benefit consulting firm in Orlando, for example, responded to a question about what needs to be done to fix the health care system.

"We are one of the sickest countries in the world, and we will have to find a way to fix that," Singleton said. "There are behavioral choices that people have to make.

"We need to have some degree of personal responsibility when it comes to health."

Dr. Firas Muwalla, a Brevard physician and partner at the Space Coast Cancer Centers, answered a question about technology and how it can be used better.

"We need to have an electronic health-records system that can be accessed through the nation," Muwalla said. "There can be significant reduction in costs immediately if this is available. They are valuable and save time and money."

Other panelists were Dr. Raymond Bellamy of the Florida State University College of Medicine in Tallahassee; Katherine Petsos, pharmacy manager at a Walgreens on Merritt Island; Richard Richmond, owner of a computer service center in Melbourne; and Charles Steinberg, a Brevard attorney who specializes in insurance coverage issues.

"We should be more argumentative here," Richmond said at one point. "We are dealing with people's

lives here."

The two-hour forum was sponsored by the League of Women Voters Space Coast and AAUW, formerly known as the American Association of University Women.

Previous public discussions in Florida and other parts of the country on health care reform have been contentious, and some even have turned violent.

The mood Thursday was subdued compared with a forum attended by 2,400 people earlier this month at the King Center for the Performing Arts and an AARP event in August that packed 300 into a meeting room in Viera.

President Barack Obama and members of Congress continue to wrestle with proposals for an overhaul.

"The issue is really about the quality of health care," said Dann Hogerty, a 44-year-old Rockledge resident who attended the event Thursday night. He said he appreciated the format of the forum that allowed for an open discussion between health care professionals.

"Of course, I agreed with some people and not others, but I like what the doctors had to say about battling the insurance companies," said Hogerty, an optician.

He said he has struggled with the cost of health insurance after being laid off three times.

"In the wealthiest country in the world, everyone should be able to get affordable health insurance," Hogerty said.

Thursday's forum ended as it began, with the sound of gentle clapping.

"Who says we here in America cannot have a nice civil discussion on health care?" Sasso asked as he wound up the panel discussion.

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