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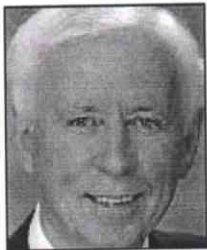
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September 09, 2009

New AMA leader: No 'silver bullet' for health reform

By ANNE GEGGIS
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DAYTONA BEACH -- For Winter Park's Dr. Cecil Wilson, preparing to be president of the American Medical Association for next year has been a little like trying to take a drink out of a fire hose.



Wilson

As next year's leader of the country's largest physician association, already he's met with hostile constituents worried about what they might lose in the upcoming health care reform effort and charges that the association is not willing to give up enough to truly reform the health care system.

Tuesday he met with members of the Volusia County Medical Society and Florida State University College of Medicine students to further discuss the AMA's support for the health care reform bill over which debate has devolved into shouting matches across the county.

The native of south Georgia who's practiced internal medicine in Winter Park for the past 30 years is unwavering in his conviction: The U.S. health system offers patients the best health care in the world through a system that is crying out for reform.

But don't ask him to name one specific thing that needs changing, or one item that the AMA considers its make-or-break provision for changing health care.

"There is no silver bullet, no single thing that will answer most of the questions," he said at an interview before Tuesday night's speech. "If we focus on one single thing we run the risk of making things worse. You can't just look at this as fixing one or two things."

He likened every issue as a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Without reforming each one of those pieces, a hole will be left in the system. Not only do the uninsured need to be covered, for example, reform of insurance is needed.

"The (insurance) system is a nightmare for physicians and patients," he said.

He ticked off the other problems that also need addressing. Reform of the tort system to curb what he estimates is the \$120 billion a year spent on "defensive medicine" in the form of unneeded tests; a restructuring of doctors' Medicare payments that haven't increased for seven years. And reining in health care costs caused by irresponsible personal behavior, such as the \$140 billion a year spent on managing adult-onset diabetes that's often the result of poor eating and exercise habits.

Volusia County Medical Society President Gloria Barkin said Tuesday night's talk generated so much interest she was estimating a turnout twice as large as usual. Among the 400 medical society members,

185 participants were registered for the evening. Wilson smiled wryly at the prospect of Tuesday night's turnout.

"Check for stones at the gate," he said.

Wilson said the issues that have dominated the health care debate so far are somewhat distorted in their presentation to the public. He called the proposal to offer Medicare payment for doctor discussions about end-of-life care as pulling the plug on grandma as "disingenuous." He said that these discussions are simply a reflection of how wide the options are for prolonging life and one person might not want to be resuscitated when they reach a certain condition while another would.

"I actually know the physician who got his congressman to put this in the bill," Wilson said. "Decisions about end-of-life care are decisions you would like to be able to make while you're able to make them."

Wilson also said having a government-run insurance option -- the so-called "public option" that some members of the Democratic party have portrayed as crucial to taming health insurance company transgressions -- is not crucial in the AMA's view.

"We'll look back and wonder why we spent so much energy on something that turned out not to be a factor," Wilson said, predicting insurance company competition will produce the desired result once tens of millions more are added to the insurance rolls.

Wilson said the AMA is "deadly serious" about reforming health care. The country simply can't afford health care costs doubling as it's expected in the next 10 years if the current system is not changed.

"If we become somewhat overwhelmed by our fears about what might change," he said, "we will become paralyzed by our inaction."

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