



SPECIAL REPORT

Ostracized by Obama

By Philip Klein on 3.11.09 @ 6:10AM

As part of his drive to overhaul the nation's health-care system, President Obama has presented himself as a pragmatist who is more interested in creating the best possible plan than in rigidly adhering to a given ideology.

"It's conceivable that there are other ideas out there that we have not thought of," he acknowledged at last Thursday's White House Health Care Summit. "If there is a way of getting this done where we're driving down costs and people are getting health insurance at an affordable rate and have choice of doctor, have flexibility in terms of their plans, and we could do that entirely through the market, I'd be happy to do it that way. If there was a way of doing it that involved more government regulation and involvement, I'm happy to do it that way as well. I just want to figure out what works."

President Obama has used events such as community discussion groups and last week's summit to foster the impression that he is soliciting opinions from all angles of the health care debate, but the reality is a lot different. Obscured by the Administration's theatrics is the fact that it has kept at bay those who advocate free-market solutions rather than government-run health care.

The guest list to the summit was a telling sign. Despite having representatives from 169 different labor, industry, and policy organizations, the White House did not invite any organizations that

advocate a consumer-based free-market approach to health care.

Progressive organizations such as the Center for American Progress, Health Care for America NOW!, and Campaign for America's Future were represented, but pro-market groups such as the Cato Institute, Consumers for Health Care Choices, the Galen Institute, or the Council for Affordable Health Insurance were not.

"They brought in the health care establishment to basically divvy up the pie, and consumers were left out of it entirely," lamented Greg Scandlen, president of Consumers for Health Care Choices. "This is all predetermined and orchestrated to get the result they want."

While the Republican Congressional leadership was on hand, many of the foremost proponents of a patient-focused approach to health care were not.

"I suspect that that can't be an accident," Rep. John Shadegg, a Republican who has proposed a number of market-oriented reforms to the U.S. health care system and did not receive an invitation to the summit, said. "I suspect that they don't want those views expressed."

Shadegg noted that other lawmakers who weren't invited included free marketers such as Rep. Paul Ryan, Rep. Tom Price, Sen. Richard Burr, Sen. Jim DeMint, and Obama's personal friend, Sen. Tom Coburn.

By contrast, Sen. Bernard Sanders and Rep. John Conyers were on hand -- both of them advocate a socialized, or single-payer, system.

The Obama administration's unwillingness to consider free-market views wasn't limited to the summit. *TAS* spoke to several professionals who took the Obama transition team up on its call to hold community meetings last December aimed at generating ideas on how to reform the health-care system. But those who came up with ideas focused on a consumer-based approach rather than a government-run one felt that their ideas were ignored.

"They called out for everyone to have all of these town meetings, but if your town meeting didn't have a conclusion that agreed with theirs, they said 'thank you very much' and never came back to you," said Dr. Marcy Zwelling-Aamot, who participated in a meeting in Long Beach, California, along with a coalition of local lawmakers, hospitals, providers, and concerned residents.

Zwelling-Aamot has a practice of 400, mostly middle-class patients whom she gives her cell phone number and email address to be more accessible. She said she is concerned that this kind personal doctor-patient relationship will be compromised in favor of a "one size fits all" approach as the government seeks to rein in costs by enticing providers to treat patients on the basis of government research studies.

"There aren't any two people in my practice that are treated the same way, even if they might

have a diagnosis that's exactly like the guy who came in ten minutes ago, their health needs are entirely different," Zwelling-Aamot said.

She complained that neither Congress nor the Obama administration was listening to the people who have real-life experience with the system.

"Nobody seems to get it there," she said. "They want to pretend to reinvent health care when they clearly have not been listening to the patients."

Others related similar experiences.

Ralph Weber, who designs free-market health insurance plans, attended a meeting in Paso Robles, California, where he and his wife described how their horrific experiences with government-run health care prompted them to flee from Canada. While living in Canada, his wife became crippled after waiting two and a half years for foot surgery. Then his son had a bike riding accident in which he smashed his head against the windshield of a car. After a four-hour wait in the emergency room, his son received an x-ray, but the government wouldn't allow him to obtain a CT Scan to determine whether there was any brain injury.

After hearing Weber's experiences, the group sent feedback to the Obama transition team suggesting that the new administration do a comprehensive study of other health-care systems to look at the consequences of government control.

While the group received a thank you email in response, they weren't asked to participate in the process any further, according to Dee Hinds, who organized the meeting and owns an employee benefits firm with his wife. Hinds said the lack of follow-through by the Obama team stood in stark contrast to the account he got from a woman he met at a nearby health fair. According to Hinds, she had attended a different meeting in Los Osos, California.

"Their consensus had been that there should be a program that everybody has to participate in that is run and paid for by the government," he recounted, "and they got a very nice email back thanking them for their participation and asking if they'd like to be involved in further discussion."

Entering the White House during last Thursday's summit, attendees passed large flat screen televisions showing images of average Americans participating in the various community discussion groups. The White House also passed out a 120-page color booklet produced by the Department of Health and Human Services reporting on the meetings. "This extensive and intense engagement of the public in policy development by the Federal government is unprecedented and historic," the executive summary boasted.

Much of the book was used as an opportunity to promote Obama's own ideas for health care reform, such as creating a government-run insurance exchange and expanding the use of information technology.

In a section on the role of government versus the market, it described a meeting in Middletown, Virginia, that concluded that the health-care systems' problems were caused by excessive regulations and that additional government interference would make things worse. But the book summarized, "This opinion was in the distinct minority."

The same section of the book devoted a special box to single-payer health care, for which HHS claimed to have received "numerous reports, in part due to the encouragement of advocacy groups..."

The White House did not return a call seeking comment for this story.

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, had a chuckle when asked about the administration's failure to reach out to free-market advocates.

"It's honest in the sense that there's no way the Obama administration is going to pursue free-market health-care reform," he remarked. "On the other hand, it's a bit of play acting to say they're reaching out and open to all ideas and that sort of thing. They're not."



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