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Wall Street Journal
WORLD HEALTH CARE CONGRESS
Washington, D.C.
April 19, 2006

Good afternoon, and thank you for joining this session. Together, we will examine whether the President's health system reform proposals will be adequate to deal with the health care crisis we face and whether they will fulfill the promises he and his advisors have made for them.

I am Dr. Henry Simmons, president of the National Coalition on Health Care, our nation's largest and most broadly representative non-partisan alliance working for comprehensive health care system reform. The Coalition's recommendations for reform are on our website at www.nchc.org.

We have with us today, two nationally recognized experts -- Dr. Joseph Antos, the Wilson Taylor Scholar in Health Care and Retirement Policy at the American Enterprise Institute, and Dr. Len Nichols, director of the health policy program at the New America Foundation.

Since their extensive bios are in your program guide, I will dispense with lengthy introductions and note only that both Joe and Len bring an incredible amount of expertise, credibility, and high-level experience to bear on the issues we are about to address. Since I have high regard for both of them, I am particularly pleased to share this panel forum with them.

Now I want to spend a few minutes to frame our discussion today.

Our nation faces a health care crisis of unprecedented magnitude. It is characterized by three major and interrelated problems.

The first problem is very high and rapidly growing health care costs. Insurance premiums have increased 73% between 2000 and 2005 -- far faster than wages and inflation. Though our per capita costs are far higher than any other industrialized nation's, it is estimated that they will double over the next 10 years. At that point, per capita health care spending will exceed 12,000 dollars per year. You can see why health care costs are the number one domestic concern for America's consumers.

President Bush's economic advisors have publicly acknowledged that rising health care costs are a drag on the economy, and that these costs must be contained because they have now created a national economic crisis adversely affecting jobs, wage growth, middle-class economic security, and the international competitiveness of American businesses.

Largely due to these rising costs, we have our second problem, which is a very large number of Americans with either no health insurance or with inadequate insurance. Our Coalition estimates that over the past five years, 10 million people have been added to the ranks of the uninsured, that more than 50 million are now uninsured, and that their number is increasing by 2 million each year.

Despite our huge health care expenditures, we have a third major problem which is an epidemic of sub-standard and dangerous care. The Institute of Medicine has concluded that there is a huge "quality chasm" -- between the care Americans should receive and the care actually delivered. As a result, more than 200,000 people lose their lives and millions more are unnecessarily injured each year. Poor quality is now estimated to be the nation's third leading cause of death just behind cancer and heart disease.

And finally, we have the most complex, non user-friendly system on the face of the earth which costs us 300 to 500 billion dollars yearly to administer. Since these problems grow larger every day, the cost of inaction is huge.

These are the elements of our health care crisis. The transcendent domestic question facing our nation is how do we deal with a systemic crisis of this magnitude and how do we deal with it rapidly enough to prevent the problems from growing even larger.

President Bush has called for a series of reform initiatives which include:

- Additional tax incentives to accelerate enrollment in health savings accounts;
- association health plans for joint purchasing;
- malpractice reforms and limits on awards;
- modest expansion of community health centers, and
- a call for greater health care price transparency.

The President and his advisors claim that these reforms will make health care more affordable, accessible, transparent, and efficient. His critics disagree and note that even some of these "modest proposals" are substantially under-funded.

We will now turn to our speakers to hear their views as to whether, given the urgent need for action, these reforms will be adequate to the task at hand.