

Obama pitches health care plan in front of doctors

October 5 2009, By CHARLES BABINGTON , Associated Press Writer



Doctors, wearing lab coats, who were audience members, take photos in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington, Monday, Oct. 5, 2009, prior to President Barack Obama making remarks on health care reform. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

(AP) -- On the cusp of a key legislative push, President Barack Obama on Monday filled the Rose Garden with doctors supportive of his health care overhaul, saying "nobody has more credibility with the American people on this issue than you do."

Obama's White House event gave him another chance to frame the debate on his terms as his top domestic priority enters its most critical phase with legislation moving toward floor debates in the Senate and the House.

The Senate Finance Committee is expected to clear its long-debated, intensely scrutinized bill this week. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., said a vote originally expected by Tuesday has been pushed back, because the Congressional Budget Office is still crunching cost and coverage numbers.

The latest version of the Finance bill will cover fewer people, after senators last week softened penalties for not carrying health insurance. Stabenow said she expects it will cover 92 percent or 93 percent of Americans, down from about 95 percent in earlier versions. The penalties were reduced because there's not enough money in the \$900-billion, 10-year bill to provide subsidies for all middle-class households.

White House budget director Peter Orszag acknowledged the tension between keeping down costs and the goal of providing coverage for all.

"There's no doubt there's a trade-off," he told reporters and editors from The Associated Press in an interview Monday.

After Finance finishes its work, Senate Democratic leaders will meld it with a more liberal-leaning version passed by the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. The House also must combine differing versions of its own bills before opening floor debate.

Such details - and the excruciating choices they can involve - were absent from Obama's photo opportunity with physicians.

For a visual plug from some medical pros, the White House arranged for the president to have some 150 doctors representing all 50 states arrayed in the sunsplashed lawn area just outside the West Wing. To make sure no one watching at home or catching news footage later would miss the point, the physicians wore their white medical coats for the cameras.

"When you cut through all the noise and all the distractions that are out there, I think what's most telling is that some of the people who are most supportive of reform are the very medical professionals who know the health care system best," said Obama, flanked by four doctors on stage for good measure.

But Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., an orthopedic surgeon for 25 years, said many doctors, nurses and patients strongly oppose Obama's proposals.

They are greatly alarmed at proposed cuts in Medicare, which is the main source of health care for many people in Wyoming and elsewhere, Barrasso said in an interview Monday. He said doctors and hospitals also want provisions to protect them against "abusive lawsuits" by people claiming malpractice.

Obama broke no ground in his comments. He outlined the tenets of his health reform plan: expanded and affordable health coverage options for tens of millions of people, strengthened protections for those who already have insurance, and more time for health professionals to help patients with preventative and healing care.

Obama said the country has heard all sides of the debate over the last few months and the time to act is now.

"I want to thank every single doctor who is here," Obama said. "And I especially want to thank you for agreeing to fan out across the country and make the case about why this reform effort is so desperately needed. You are the people who know this system best. You are the experts."

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