

Politics of health care's triple aim

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Health policy guru Donald Berwick contends that improving our nation's health care system requires the simultaneous pursuit of three aims: enhancing the individual experience of care, improving the health of populations, and, most critically, reducing the per capita costs of health care.

In other words, the key health policy challenge facing our fragmented, often competing, system of health care providers, insurers, and consumers is achieving the difficult, yet attainable, "Triple Aim" of better health and better care at a lower cost. Berwick adds that the "Holy Grail of universal coverage may remain out of reach unless, through rational collective action overriding some individual self interest, we can reduce per capita health care costs."

It is far too early to know whether the Affordable Care Act has brought us closer to achieving health care's Triple Aim, since the law's core provisions – public and private coverage expansions for the working poor and those whose jobs don't provide health insurance – won't roll out until after the first of the year. It is also difficult to assess the ACA's impact given the lack of dispassionate information from many of our political leaders and their allies. Over the past four years, reform's opponents have spent an estimated \$400 million "educating" the public on the nefarious features of the ACA.

One of the most odious features of debates on the proper role of government in health care is that they are dominated by lawmakers and lobbyists who enjoy the good fortune and peace of mind that comes with gold-plated health insurance coverage. The daily indignities and financial burdens faced the uninsured are typically lost in most of these discussions.

For the past three years, conservatives have complained mightily about Obamacare and other purported threats to the republic, offering few substantive solutions to the problems faced by the growing ranks of the uninsured.

Congressional Republicans have devoted most of their energy to short-changing the law's implementation and otherwise vilifying the law's namesake. Their efforts include three dozen symbolic attempts to repeal the ACA and numerous not-so-symbolic effort to sabotage the law's implementation, including Senator Dean Heller's recently introduced and opportunistically titled "IRS Accountability Act" which would halt funding to the IRS for new agents needed to carry out key eligibility and enforcement provisions contained in the law.

The passage and survival of President Obama's signature health legislation has nonetheless moved our nation a step closer to a day in which millions of Americans will gain health insurance coverage and the security of knowing that their coverage will remain intact even if they lose their job or suffer some other economic misfortune.

In Nevada, reform will halve our state's uninsured rate – currently, 25 percent of adults under the age of 65 are uninsured – resulting in coverage to 350,000 uninsured Nevadans by 2020 and protecting all of us from the worst abuses of the health insurance industry.

At the end of the day, the past three years have been a reminder that the barriers to achieving the Triple Aim of better health and better care for all Americans are largely political, rather than technical in nature.

John Packham, PhD is Director of Health Policy Research at the University of Nevada School of Medicine and Immediate Past President of the Nevada Public Health Association.