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Obama aligned to U.S. bishops on health care

by Mary Barron



In declaring that health care should be a right for every

American, Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama has squarely aligned himself with a teaching of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Now an organization of lay Catholics within the Democratic Party is challenging Sen. John McCain to switch his stance and do the same. Catholic Democrats is calling on the McCain campaign to acknowledge the fundamental right to health care, especially for the most vulnerable of our population, the group said in a written statement Wednesday.

If the Catholic notion of the common good really means anything, it surely motivates us to help keep all Americans healthy through an insurance system that covers everyone, said Dr. Patrick Whelan of Boston, a pediatric specialist who serves as the group's president.

The McCain campaign did not respond to a request for its reaction.

The American bishops' 2007 statement on Faithful Citizenship, while endorsing no political party, calls health care a fundamental human right and an urgent national priority.

Although neither candidate is Catholic, Obama has recently sought to highlight his early connections to the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who served as the first general secretary of the bishops' conference and later as its president. In an interview with *Catholic Digest*, Obama remembers as the cardinal as "a wonderful figure in Chicago I had the opportunity to work with, who said that health care should be a right." When Obama was in the Illinois Legislature, he co-sponsored a proposed Amendment to the state Constitution named for Bernardin that would have made health care a right of all Illinoisans.

In Tuesday's presidential debate, moderator Tom Brokaw asked both candidates whether health care was a privilege, right or responsibility. Their answers illuminated the stark difference in their approaches to fixing a health care system that has become unaffordable and inaccessible to many ordinary Americans.

McCain stressed the responsibility of individuals and employers. "I think it is a responsibility in this respect -- in that we should have available and affordable health care to every American citizen," McCain said. But government mandates make him nervous, he said, and he implied the responsibility should be diffuse. "It is certainly my responsibility. It is certainly small-business people and others, and they understand that responsibility. American citizens understand that. Employers understand that."

Obama countered with perhaps the most fervent statement of the debate, on a night when both candidates seemed cautious and methodical.

"I think it should be a right for every American," Obama said. "In a country as wealthy as ours, for us to have people who are going bankrupt because they can't pay their medical bills -- for my mother to die of cancer at the age of 53 and have to spend the last months of her life in the hospital room arguing with insurance companies because they're saying that this may be a pre-existing condition and they don't have to pay her treatment, there's something fundamentally wrong about that."

Obama's health care plan relies on economies of scale, based on large numbers of people choosing to enroll in the same kind of health insurance plan that covers the U.S. Congress if they are unhappy with their current coverage or don't have any. Subsidies would be available for low-income people to enroll. Children would be required to be insured, but adults would not. People happy with their current coverage could keep it, and the proposal includes measures aimed at reducing the cost of their premiums.

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McCain's plan relies on marketplace competition that he says would be generated if insurance companies were freed from state-by-state regulation and could vie against one another nationwide, selling health coverage person by person. Individuals and families would receive a \$2,500 or \$5,000 tax credit, respectively, and regardless of level of need, to help them pay a portion of the cost of buying their own insurance.

Obama says his plan could be paid for by allowing the expiration of the Bush tax cuts for people making more than \$250,000 and by potential cost-savings from increased efficiency in health care. Large businesses would need to provide employees health benefits or contribute toward the public coverage.

McCain's plan would be paid for by the 177 million people whose health insurance comes through their employers. They would have their employer-provided benefits taxed as income, for the first time ever. The idea is not finding much support among businesses or doctors.

?Sen. McCain's plan to tax employee health benefits just like all other income is a radical experiment that could result in an additional 20 million working people losing the health insurance they currently have,? Dr. Whelan said. An estimated 45 million Americans are currently uninsured.

Neither candidate offered clear solutions for Medicare, the health insurance program for the elderly and disabled. Many primary care doctors no longer accept new Medicare patients, and both Medicare and Social Security face a crisis in funding as baby boomers retire.

Obama?s published plan includes cutting funding from the Medicare Advantage Plans introduced in 2003. McCain said the benefits provided by entitlement programs would need to be reduced. Pressed for specifics, both in the debate and in telephone requests, neither the candidates nor campaign staffs have provided details.

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