

Single-payer health care on life support

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A caravan of Oregon doctors stopped in Madison recently to help local activists try to revive a comatose patient: single-payer medical coverage.

Calling themselves the Mad as Hell Doctors, the physician-activists are crossing the country in a quixotic quest to draw more attention to the revolutionary reform, which they believe is the only viable fix for this country's health care crisis.

Their trek gave local activists, battered by a long summer of conservative attacks and frustrated by the paralysis in Washington, a much-needed shot of hope and energy. "Single payer is not dead as long as the public keeps pushing," says Dr. Gene Farley, who with his late wife, Linda, has fought for universal coverage for decades. "We've got to get the noise great enough so the politicians have to listen to the people rather than to big money."

Yet Farley and other local activists admit that even such heroic measures are unlikely to make a difference - this year.

None of the various drafts of legislation being debated by Congress that were given any realistic shot at passage come close to proposing the sort of sweeping Medicare-for-all program long favored by Wisconsin's well-organized contingent of single-payer advocates.

To their dismay, the long-awaited proposal unveiled last week by Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., lacks even a compromise public option measure that would offer a miniature version of a government program to some of the country's 46 million uninsured.

President Barack Obama has shunned single-payer advocates for months, and he certainly has not responded to the Oregon group's requests to meet when its "Care-a-Van" arrives in Washington on Oct. 1. The White House even started blocking e-mails from thousands of supporters asking for such a meeting.

All of this makes the weary travelers and local activists ... well, mad as hell.

"I'm mad as hell about the way the government of the United States has ignored the wishes that all of us have," Dr. Eugene Uphoff, a Dane county native who works as a family physician in Portland, Ore., told hundreds of protesters at a rally on the state Capitol steps last week. Uphoff claimed public opinion surveys prove a majority of Americans and their doctors now support major health care reform. (A survey released last week by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation shows that while 62.9 percent of physicians nationwide support proposals to expand health care coverage that would include both private and public options, only 9.6 percent support the kind of plan Mad as Hell doctors espouse.)

Activists complain that ever since the notion of a single-payer system was first proposed by Teddy Roosevelt in the early 1900s, the private health insurance industry it would replace has spent billions in lobbying and advertising costs to kill it. "The insurance companies are terrorists ... and leeches," Henry Steinberger, a Madison psychologist, said at a forum sponsored by the Oregon doctors.

But while they blame the giant health care industry and Washington politicians, local health care reformers admit there is another contributing diagnosis for what ails the single-payer health plan. Even after - or perhaps because of - months and months of debate, many people in Wisconsin and across the country still don't know what the heck a single-payer plan even is.

Minutes before the Mad as Hell rally, an informal survey of the crowd around the Capitol found many were at a loss to describe their understanding of a single-payer system, including some of the people who said they support it.

"I would think that it should come covering everything, basically," said one young Madison resident who chuckled when he realized he had not provided a very clear answer. "I'm not really sure, to be honest."

Another Madison resident paused for several seconds as he gave a halting explanation of what he felt the plan meant. "I think it's ... it's one payer for everything," he said. "I think the payer is ... part of the taxes. I'm here to encourage this to happen."

Robert Kraig, program director for Citizen Action of Wisconsin, says these Madison residents are not the only ones confused by the current debate. "People just don't get this," he says. "It's a very abstract concept. It's something that's understood by a well-educated group of progressive activists. But the problem is that the average voter has no idea what the words 'single payer' mean."

Marcia Riquelme, a grandmother and a local organizer with the Dane Grassroots Network who has fought for single-payer coverage full time since 2008, agrees: "A lot of peoples' lives are too busy and hectic to have time to figure out what this all means."

As a result, she says, some people end up falling for conservative "lies and distortions" that the single-payer plan is nothing more than socialized medicine, and will lead to "death panels" and rationed care.

The Mad as Hell doctors offered local activists a prescription. "To win the war and the argument at the water cooler, it is important that everybody here have clear in their minds what single payer is," Adam Klugman, the group's national creative director, said during a forum at First Unitarian Society.

Krugman said the Oregon doctors had come up with a one-sentence definition, which he asked the audience to memorize: "A system of payment that redirects all current health care monies, both public and private, into a single public fund that covers everyone."

Supporters argue such a plan would be more humane than the current system because it covers even the very sick and needy, who often are excluded or dropped by private policies, and more cost-efficient because it cuts out the health care industry's overhead and profits - which comprise a growing portion of the \$2 trillion spent every year on health care in this country.

So how long did it take a half-dozen Mad as Hell doctors to work out this definition?

"Six hours," said Joseph Eusterman, a retired doctor of internal medicine from Portland, Ore. "Like a herd of cats in a room."

Left out, of course, were some of the most confusing and controversial aspects of various models of single-payer systems worldwide - including details on exactly how the federal government would run, manage and operate the program, and the specifics on what would happen to the 1,300 or so private insurance companies that currently cover many Americans. (As advocates point out, many other Americans are already covered by single-payer plans such as Medicare.)

Everyone - even among those who support a single-payer system - has different ideas of what such a program means and how it should work, explains Donna Friedsam, health policy programs director for the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, which recently surveyed Wisconsin doctors about health care reform.

According to the study, published in this month's Wisconsin Medical Journal, when asked if the State of Wisconsin should establish a single-payer system to pay providers instead of using private health plans, 40.4 percent of primary care doctors said they were strongly or somewhat in favor, compared with 42.7 percent who were somewhat to strongly opposed. (Among non-primary care specialists, 61.9 percent opposed the concept compared with 23.7 percent in favor.) "It is a very polarizing issue," Friedsam says.

So what's the prognosis, given the confusion and controversy still out there?

Local activists were less optimistic than the Mad as Hell physicians, one of whom got mad - though not mad as hell - at a reporter when asked if he ever worried that wandering the country in a van fighting to revive a single-payer system was a little like the famous story of Don Quixote, who wandered Spain tilting at windmills. "What would the point be of doing this if we didn't think it would succeed?" Eusterman asked.

Some local reformers and experts said that while noble, the caravan's journey just might be futile and even a bit foolish. "We all need to back out of our corners and find the compromise solution without falling on our swords and getting nothing," Friedsam says.

Kraig agrees. Wisconsin's single-payer activists have worked well with more

moderate reformers who back Obama's rehaul, he says. But elsewhere across the country, there is a bitter rift between hard-core single-payer advocates and moderates. He worries that passions unleashed by the Mad as Hell road trip could make it tougher for these groups to work together. "We're in what the founding fathers called a unite or die against Britain situation," he says. "We have to unite to win a historical battle over huge special interests. We cannot undermine it."

Others say they are grateful that the Oregon doctors stopped in Madison, and that they are an example of a growing national movement that will resurrect single-payer coverage one day. "This is like the civil rights battle," says Ron Biendseil, an activist with the Middleton Action Team, a group of mostly retired residents who meet once a week over breakfast to plan their latest moves in the health care fight. "It went down in defeat many, many times, but it wasn't really over. We're not going to let this die."