

Opinion

Editorial Board

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OUR VIEW

Health care, ho!

State should avoid repeat of Massachusetts

For Colorado Democrats, a regulatory fix of the state's ailing health care system may seem irresistible during the upcoming 2008 legislative session. Imagine the attention major health care reform, or statewide "universal health care," would garner from the media in August, when the country's Democrats converge in Denver for the Democratic National Convention. Colorado could be held up as the example of how it can and should be done. Democratic leaders could be lauded for aiding 792,000 uninsured men, women and children.

House Speaker Andrew Romanoff, as quoted in The Gazette, says Coloradans are tired of waiting on a federal government that "cannot or won't fix" the health care crisis. The Blue-Ribbon Commission on Health Care Reform, appointed by legislative leaders and the governor, will present its recommendations to the Legislature on Jan. 31. The commission plans to recommend that all Colorado residents be mandated to buy insurance that meets minimum standards, and state subsidies would be extended to more of the state's poor.

Before politicians get too ambitious, however, they should take a closer look at the health care reform led by a leading Republican: Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts.

"The majority of the commission favors a government-heavy proposal," says Dr. Paul Hsieh, a Denver physician who has studied the new Massachusetts system. "They're crafting it similar to the Massachusetts model."

A year old, the Massachusetts system is resulting in rationing and shortages of care, and higher costs to taxpayers than originally expected. The Patriot Ledger newspaper tells of Lee Sampson, a 47-year-old unemployed medical transcriptionist. Sampson bought into Commonwealth Care, a state-subsidized insurance cooperative. She had to buy insurance by Jan. 1 to avoid tax penalties and fines.

But Sampson, like a growing number of other Massachusetts residents, is learning that mandatory insurance doesn't mean doctors will treat her. To receive benefits from the plan, Sampson must find a primary care physician. She reported calling 50 doctors' offices within a half-hour drive of her home. All rejected her. Most explained they were overwhelmed and accepting no new patients.

Massachusetts, like Canada, will learn that mandating health care as a universal right results in a demand for services that exceeds the supply. The demand for medical services under the new Massachusetts system has become so great, and so expensive, that state officials are cutting back on the compensation doctors receive for services, while raising patient co-pays. The medical community, struggling with high demand and inadequate reimbursement, is cutting costs by rationing services for patients like Sampson.

Ask Americans if they would enjoy free universal health care, like the Canadians have, and many will say yes. Ask the same folks if they'd like to wait several months for an MRI, a heart scan or chemotherapy — as Canadians often do — and they'll give a resounding "no way."

Yet one can't argue that our nation's health care system is well. As reported by The New York Times, health care costs are going up at twice the rate of inflation. With soaring costs come rising insurance rates, which fewer employers and individuals are willing or able to pay. Based on U.S. Census data, 10 million Americans were uninsured 15 years ago. Today, more than 46 million live uninsured.

While it's expedient for politicians to promise a solution in the form of a program, Massachusetts will continue showing us why it doesn't work. Government intervention, in fact, explains the failures of our current system. The IRS code drives most Americans to buy health insurance through employers. That means insurers don't have to compete for consumers, because for most Americans, shopping around for a better deal involves a career change. And because health insurance has been packaged as a "free" benefit from employers, patients have spent the past half-century consuming health care without challenging the price. For those with health plans, "insurance" has morphed into pre-paid service, seemingly paid for by someone else. Imagine a system in which large employers provided auto insurance. Would employees balk at the cost of this "free" benefit, demanding a better price? If the insurance covered routine oil and lube jobs, the way health insurance covers physicals, would consumers demand lower prices from Grease Monkey? Doubtful.

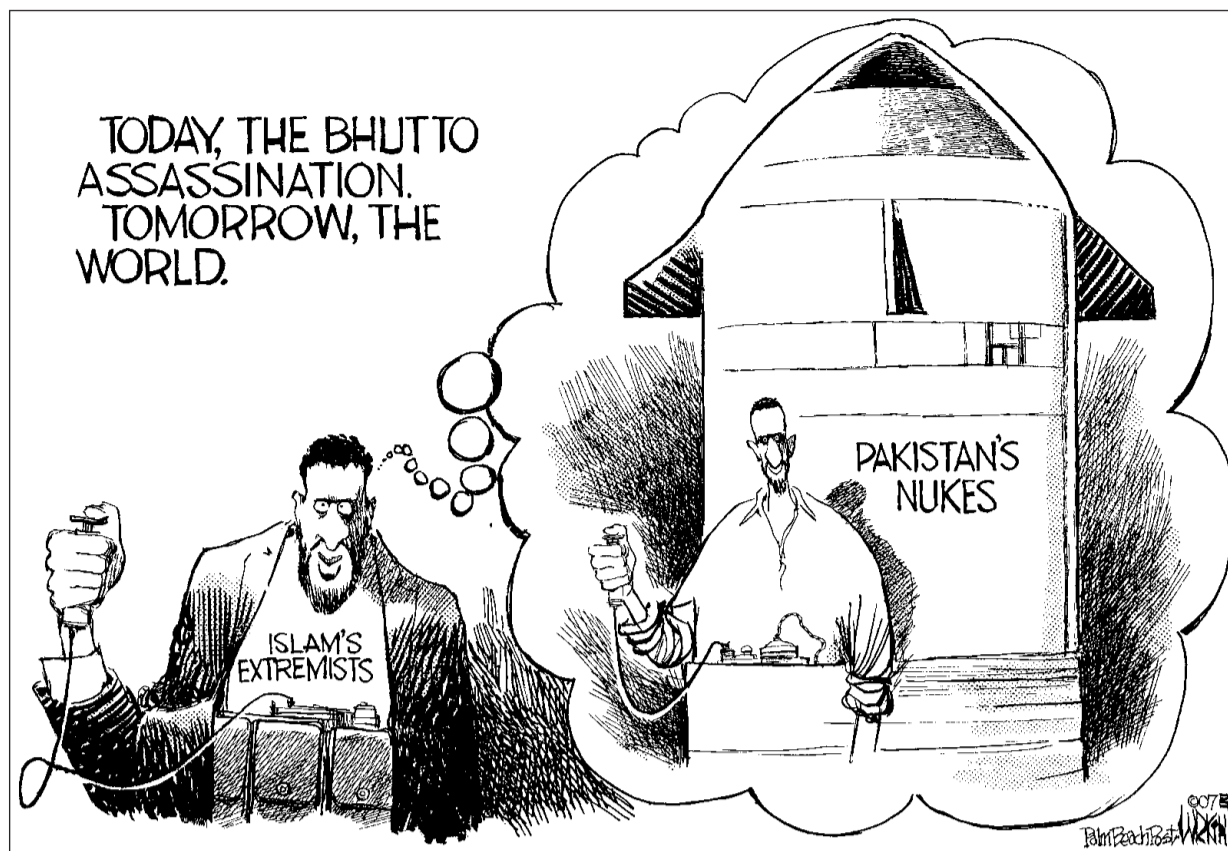
State legislators can't change the morass of federal regulation that has led to a health care system unrestrained by the conventional market forces that control other services and goods. But legislators can improve access to health care by eliminating most of the state controls that prohibit affordable coverage. State law, for example, requires that health insurance plans include coverage for childhood autism — even for consumers with no prospect of children. Regardless of a consumer's personal needs, any policy he or she buys in Colorado must cover alcohol rehab, mental health and maternity treatments — to name a few. Why not a law that says all cell phone plans must come with 80-channel cable TV?

Brian Schwartz, an Arvada-based optical engineer, proposed to the Blue Ribbon Commission a market-based health care reform package that mostly involved deregulation. Commission member Linda Gorman fought for it, but others scoffed.

"One commissioner said we already have a free market in health care, and it has failed," Schwartz told The Gazette. "But we don't have a free market. If you're a widow, you have to buy a policy that covers marital therapy, maternity and prostate cancer. You have no need for this, but if you want insurance you're required to buy it. Mandates raise your premium by 20 to 50 percent."

Government, as we're seeing in Massachusetts, can't make health care affordable and abundant. Market forces can and will — if politicians ever allow them to.

ANOTHER VIEW



DON WRIGHT, TRIBUNE MEDIA SERVICES

Negative ads serve voters by showing candidates' flaws

Negative campaigning has a bad reputation, routinely being disparaged as juvenile taunting that serves only to degrade public discourse. A New York Times headline the other day noted "Bickering and Negative Ads in Countdown to Caucuses," as though these were the moral equivalent of an old married couple grousing about that mess in the kitchen.

Even devoted practitioners feel the duty to deplore negative campaigning. After commissioning an ad accusing Mitt Romney of grievous departures from conservative wisdom, Mike Huckabee was so remorseful that he refused to run it — though he managed to disseminate his charges in a news conference where he sorrowfully screened the spot for the news media.

But what was so terrible about the ad? It merely said that as governor of Massachusetts, Romney raised taxes, left a budget deficit, provided abortion coverage in his universal health care program, and failed to carry out a single execution — all of which appear to be grounded in fact, and any of which a few voters would find interesting.

The spot thus passes the only two tests voters should apply to any campaign attack: Is it true, and is it important? Accusing Romney of having devil's horns would be unacceptable because, though significant, it's not true. Accusing him of owning too many sweaters, though true, would be over the line because it doesn't matter.

It would be nice if politicians were all saintly figures who invariably do the



OPINION

STEPHEN CHAPMAN
 Chicago Tribune columnist

right thing. Since they are not, negative campaigning serves the helpful function of illuminating facts that a) people are likely to care about and b) the targets would prefer we didn't know. In fact, if it weren't for attacks on the air and on the stump, our campaigns might have all the nutritional content of a Coke Zero.

What would we glean about the current candidates from watching only their own positive ads and presentations? That Hillary Clinton has unmatched experience in government and is a good listener to boot. That John Edwards is tireless in fighting for You. That Mitt Romney loves his highly photogenic family. That John McCain is a common-sense conservative. That Mike Huckabee is unabashedly in favor of Christmas. That Rudy Giuliani will kill terrorists with his bare hands. That Barack Obama's serene wisdom would make Gandhi look like Bill O'Reilly.

Compare those blinding revelations with what we know about the same candidates from unflattering portrayals offered by their opponents and other uncharitable souls: Clinton's experience is greatly exaggerated. As a state senator, Obama's Zen-like approach to divisive legislation often led him to vote neither "yes" nor "no" but "present."

Giuliani has a history of support for

gun control and abortion rights. Huckabee has changed his position on illegal immigration. Edwards has changed his position on the Iraq war. Romney has changed his position on everything.

Any of these particular discoveries may strike you as good, bad or irrelevant. But the only reason they get attention is that they furnish some voters with information that will influence their vote.

I don't want to be entirely positive about negativity. Political attacks can also be nasty, unfair or even outrageously false. When a top Clinton campaign official wondered if Obama might have been a drug dealer in his youth, the suggestion was all three. But rather than damaging Obama, the claim backfired, forcing the aide to resign.

When Huckabee asked whether Mormons (such as Romney) really believe that Satan is the brother of Jesus, he did voters a similar service. True or false, it's about as relevant to a candidate's fitness for office as whether he believes in purgatory. And by raising it, Huckabee made himself sound like he should be running for pastor, not president.

Thomas Jefferson once said that he would prefer newspapers without a government to a government without newspapers. Given a choice between politics with no negative campaigning and politics with only negative campaigning, I suspect he would prefer the latter.

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DAVID M. HITCH, NORTH AMERICA SYNDICATE

QUOTE, UNQUOTE

"A decent and manly examination of the acts of government should not only be tolerated, but encouraged."

WILLIAM H. HARRISON

"There is no grievance that is a fit object of redress by mob law."

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

"The right of self-defense never ceases. It is among the most sacred, and alike necessary to nations and to individuals."

JAMES MONROE

PRINCIPLES OF FREEDOM



We believe freedom is a gift from God and not a political grant from government. Freedom is neither license nor anarchy. It is self-control. No more, no less. It must be consistent with the truths expressed in such great moral guides as the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule and the Declaration of Independence. These were the principles that guided Freedom Communications Inc. founder R.C. Hoiles and his descendants. They continue to be the basis of Our View. All other views on these pages are those of their authors.