

Health care straight talk

**By Rick Miller**  
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ST. BONAVENTURE - More than 75 students and local residents listened Sunday as Rep. Eric Massa and Dr. Andrew Coates of Physicians For a National Health Care Plan sought to dispel myths associated with a single-payer, national health-insurance plan.

The health-care forum, "Single Payer Health Care Under the Microscope," was sponsored by the Olean-Allegany Health Care Access Coalition. Students in the university's pre-med program and members of the audience questioned Rep. Massa and Dr. Coates.

Athena Godet-Calogeras of the Health Care Access Coalition served as moderator, and pre-med students Devin Patel and Sheetal Kumar asked questions and introduced other pre-med students who asked questions of Dr. Coates and Rep. Massa.

"Health care is not affordable in this country," said Dr. Coates, a doctor of internal medicine and a teacher at Albany Medical College. "It is not affordable for an individual. It is not affordable for business. It is not affordable for government."

Dr. Coates said he has been troubled by the fact many people cannot afford medical treatment or prescription drugs since he was an intern in New York City. It is a "shocking injustice" and "outrageous" that nearly 50 million Americans have no health insurance. Health-insurance premiums for a family can cost \$14,000 or more a year plus co-payments, deductibles and out-of-pocket costs, he said.

Rep. Massa, D-Corning, a cancer survivor and one of about 100 congressmen who favor a single-payer health-insurance plan, said flatly, "Single-payer health care is not socialized health care. It is not government-run health care," he said.

Under a single-payer system, doctors and hospitals would remain private entities who present their bills to Medicare.

Private health-insurance companies, he said, carve out as much as 30 percent of health-insurance premiums for administrative costs and profit. If everyone were covered by a Medicare-like plan, there would be lower overhead, no need for a profit of 8 percent or more and no one would have to be hired to deny medical coverage. Single-payer advocates say it could save individuals, business and government more than \$300 billion a year in health-care costs.

Despite the advantages of a single-payer health-care system, Rep. Massa noted, "We're talking about something that is not going to happen. It has been taken off the table in the national health-care debate."

Dr. Coates said the questions people should be asking is "how to get the money out of the way and how to get back to what is best for the patient."

Rep. Massa said a single-payer system could "replace for-profit health care with not-for-profit

Medicare" for everyone. To those who say Medicare is a failed system, Rep. Massa replied "It provides health care to 100 million (older) Americans."

The cost of Medicare is borne by a 1.45 percent payroll tax and by monthly payments by recipients, Rep. Massa said. By increasing the payroll tax to 3 percent, it could be expanded to cover all Americans, many of whom now pay a much larger percentage of their income for their health insurance, co-pays and deductibles.

The freshman congressman, a 24-year U.S. Navy veteran, said he hadn't seen any proposed legislation by President Obama who spoke to Congress last week to try to refocus the national debate about health-care reform. The bill now before Congress, HR3200, has neither the single-payer proposal nor a public option that is designed to compete with private health-insurance companies.

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"If I had to vote today, I would vote against it (HR3200)," Rep. Massa told the group gathered at Walsh Auditorium at St. Bonaventure. "It does not do what the president said in his speech. The private health-insurance industry loves this. It is going to increase their profits." Nothing in HR3200, he said, "addresses cost reduction."

Rep. Massa said, "I think health care is a right of all Americans."

He said he doesn't accept the congressional health-insurance plan, but instead has maintained his health benefits due to him as a veteran. He said he has been called a number of names at the many town halls he's hosted to address the health-care issue.

Asked what a single-payer system would do to the federal deficit, Rep. Massa said, "It will probably cut it in half."

Counties, he said, would no longer have to tell taxpayers they are going to raise their property taxes to pay for higher Medicaid costs. "It's (a single-payer system) so fractured our country and politicized it we can't have a sane conversation anymore."

Dr. Coates, who said a Medicare-for-all system could be implemented in this country within a year. Under HR 3200, everyone would have to purchase health insurance by 2013 or face a fine. He called it "criminalizing the uninsured."

Dr. Coates said he and other physicians who favor the single-payer system "are the ghosts in the room."

"We have a proposal to cover every individual. The problem is access to health care. The public option is a political position. Single-payer is on the table," he maintained. "It is not going away. It is the civil-rights issue of our time."

He said more than 18,000 people die every year because they don't have health insurance. The single-payer system would provide "affordable, quality and comprehensive health care for all."

Rep. Massa said, "By favoring single-payer health care, I've made myself the number-one most nationally targeted member of Congress."

Nonetheless, he added, "It is a position for providing access to health care for all Americans. It

is important to me.”

He rejected one student’s assertion that “everything government has done it has screwed up,” and cited the Medicare and Veterans Administration health-care models as evidence.

Dr. Coats said the U.S. has “the best health-care system in the world - if you can access it.” The system, however, is “mediocre” compared to the 19 other industrialized countries based on infant- and maternal-mortality rates.

Rep. Massa said as a former military man, “I’m not real good at this politics stuff. What I do in Congress has to be more than get re-elected. So few elected officials will tell you the truth.”

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