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Inglis vows to tackle drug costs

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Greenville's congressman Bob Inglis now agrees that the ever-rising cost of prescription drugs is a big problem.

Good for him.

Prescription drug costs take a big bite out of the South Carolina pocketbook and may even force some people to choose between food and medicine.

It's a crisis that deserves Inglis' committed attention.

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"Doing something about high prescription costs is an important objective," Inglis wrote in an e-mail to me Friday. "I accept that challenge."

Inglis, in his e-mail, didn't say exactly how he'd address the problem, but it's still a notable change in tone for Inglis.

I had criticized Inglis recently for downplaying the role of prescription drugs in driving up health-care costs.

Drugs account for a small percentage of health-care costs, Inglis told Greenville News editors and reporters.

The real problem, he said, is that Americans overuse health care, seeing the doctor repeatedly, going to the hospital too much and demanding expensive treatments.

That may be true, but it's a small part of the story.

Other things contribute mightily to ever-rising health-care costs, including big insurance company profits, exploding drug costs, an aging population, insurance and other administrative overhead costs, the cost of technology, and the high salaries of doctors and other top health-care professionals.

Recently, the Wall Street Journal reported the latest bad news about drug prices: The big drug companies increased wholesale prices for the 50 top-selling branded drugs by an average of 7.82 percent in 2007.

That's almost twice the rate of the overall U.S. economy's 4.1 percent inflation. It outpaces the 5 percent medical inflation rate, clearly underscoring the fact that drugs are a major driver of health-care costs.

That 2007 price increase came on top of increases of 6.73 percent in 2006 and 6.22 percent in 2005.

It gets worse. Some drugs had double-digit percentage increases.

The fact is patients in this country pay more for individual drugs than patients anywhere else in the world, according to the Journal.

Inglis currently is conducting a fact-finding health-care tour of his 4th District, visiting hospitals, businesses, doctors and nursing homes as well as talking to individuals with chronic health problems.

To top off the tour, he will hold five town hall meetings.

I hope local folks will press him to offer compelling ideas for controlling health-care costs, particularly prescription drugs.

Here is Inglis' town hall schedule:

March 17 at 7 p.m.: Bryson Elementary School (703 Bryson Drive, Simpsonville); March 18 at 7 p.m.: Greer Public Works (301 McCall St., Greer); March 20 at 7 p.m.: USC Union (401 East Main St., Union); March 24 at 7 p.m.: Upstate Family Resource Center (1850 Old Furnace Road, Boiling Springs); Thursday, March 27 at 7 p.m.: Greenville Hughes Library (25 Heritage Green Place, Greenville).
