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Inglis listening to health-care concerns

Published: Tuesday, February 5, 2008 - 2:00 am

Recognizing that South Carolinians are anxious about the rising cost of health care, U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis will be touring the 4th District over the next few weeks to listen to the health-care concerns of Upstate residents. He's calling his fact-finding tour "Seeking Patient-Centered Care."

It's a worthy effort.

"The idea is to find information about health care -- how it's being delivered and how it's being paid for," Inglis said in a recent meeting with Greenville News editors and reporters.

Inglis will spend considerable time visiting doctors, hospitals, businesses, veterans facilities, nursing homes as well as talking to individuals with chronic health-care problems. In March, he'll hold five town hall meetings to discuss health care. To participate in one of Inglis' health-care tour events, see his Web site at <http://inglis.house.gov>.

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Inglis said he wants to give citizens a chance to voice their opinions and concerns, although he's approaching the tour with a few "preconceived notions" -- including the idea that a consumer-driven approach to health care is best. Inglis is a proponent of health savings accounts, which allow people to set aside money tax free for medical expenses.

Inglis believes that if people spend their own health savings account money, they'll be less likely to go to the doctor too much or overutilize health care in other ways.

They'll be more likely also to shop around for less costly health care. Encouraging such consumer choice will force providers to lower prices to attract customers.

"The system that works best is the one where the patient has dollars in his pocket," rather than relying on health insurance coverage to pay for health care, said Inglis.

Inglis believes that health insurance, by shielding people from the true cost of health care, encourages people to overuse medical services. That drives up costs for everyone, he said.

"The problem is that someone else (our insurance company) is picking up the check," Inglis said, later adding: "If I'm spending someone else's money, I'll spend freely."

He believes the employer-provided system of health care should give way eventually to individuals controlling their own money through health savings accounts or other consumer-driven approaches.

Some 4th District residents may disagree with some of Inglis' conclusions, particularly his claim that people overuse health-care services. Health-care overutilization probably is limited to a small portion of the population.

But Inglis is to be commended for initiating the debate. He's offering those who agree or disagree an

opportunity to let their voices be heard.

To his credit, Inglis recognizes that health savings accounts might not be right for everyone, particularly for low-income and elderly people who face particularly high health-care challenges.

Even while arguing that people use health-care services too much, Inglis said underutilization of medical services also is a problem -- specifically, people not getting adequate preventive care. And that can result in bigger health-care costs later.

Through his health-care tour, Inglis is showing that he understands the urgency of controlling health-care costs and expanding access. He believes these issues should be at the top of the presidential debates.

"My hope is that the presidential race will be about health care, that it will be a productive national debate about how to deliver and pay for health care," he said. "And if it is, it will be a very helpful campaign for the country."

Bob Inglis is listening. It's time for the 4th District to speak up.
