

To not see health care as a right is 'un-American'

Jim DeMint, president of the Heritage Foundation, wrote a recent essay that was highly critical of the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") and called for its repeal. In public remarks at a rally in Delaware, he called Obamacare "un-American." His article and his statements are so full of errors and dis-

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tortions that correcting the record is important. The great irony of health-care reform and of DeMint's position is that the basic principles of "Obamacare" were precisely those developed at the Heritage Foundation and then successfully implemented in Massachusetts by Mitt Romney. The core principles are fully conservative and are not in any way a "government takeover" of the health-care industry, let alone "un-American."

To review briefly, Obamacare is based on three related policies: 1) a requirement that all people carry insurance; 2) a requirement that insurance companies offer insurance to all individuals irrespective of pre-existing conditions; and 3) financial assistance to low and

moderate income households to enable them to purchase insurance.

In addition, it strengthens the insurance market for individuals who do not receive health care from their employers and who are the most likely to be without insurance. Up to now, this market has been fragmented, expensive and difficult for individuals to navigate. "Obamacare" establishes health-insurance exchanges, which are virtual online marketplaces where a set of standardized health-insurance policies can be readily compared and then purchased by individuals. This is a huge positive step that brings health insurance into the digital age. Indications so far are that prices in the private insurance market will be lower than previously available and much easier to understand and purchase.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office has estimated that "Obamacare" will reduce the number of uninsured Americans by 37 million. Every one of us will know someone, if not many people, who will benefit from the provisions of the ACA.

The specific proposals that the Republicans in general and DeMint in particular offer

are useless and pointless. It is worth remembering the total health-care policy of Romney when he ran for president: Repeal Obamacare and allow the states to make whatever changes they wanted. That's a policy?

Now consider DeMint's specific criticisms and proposals. One of his key solutions is to allow individuals to purchase insurance across state lines which would, he argues, unleash competition. In fact, it likely would do the opposite.

Health-insurance policies currently are regulated by states. Any insurance company can sell a policy in a state as long as it meets the standards and regulations of that state. Nothing about Obamacare changes that. DeMint's proposal would undercut this, allowing policies to be sold that don't meet state standards. As has been seen repeatedly in other contexts, the certain result of a change like that is that all policies will originate in a state, like Texas, with the lowest standards and laxest regulation.

The specific criticisms DeMint levels at "Obamacare" are equally invalid. Consider the recent decision by UPS to drop health insurance for spouses, which DeMint in-

stinctively blames on "Obamacare." The problem with this criticism is that the legislation barely changes requirements for firms, like UPS, that already were providing health insurance to their employees. The UPS decision had much more to do with the fragmented nature of health insurance than any impact of "Obamacare." UPS simply concluded that it would not continue to pay for health insurance for working spouses of their employees who were offered insurance at their own workplaces.

DeMint also complains that the new insurance exchanges are months behind schedule. He fails to explain that most of the delay came from Republican governors, like Pennsylvania's Tom Corbett, who deliberately put off preparing to implement the exchanges because they wanted "Obamacare" to fail. The exchanges will be up and operating on time, despite the best efforts of Corbett and others. Delaware's exchange is at www.choosehealthde.com.

The recent decision by the Obama administration to delay the employer mandate was made not because it would harm economic growth as DeMint claims, but because

the extended litigation about "Obamacare" delayed creation of data systems by firms that would enable them to comply with the mandate. The delay will have little impact on the goal of increasing health care access, because 96 percent of firms with 50 or more employees – the group affected by the employer mandate – already offer health insurance to their employees.

Although DeMint claims that "Obamacare" will contribute to the debt, the CBO, the official arbiter of the economic impact of new policies, disagrees. It concluded that "Obamacare" actually would reduce the deficit slightly over the first decade because of the inclusion of tax increases and cost savings.

Lastly and most importantly, nothing about "Obamacare" is "un-American." What is un-American about recognizing health care as a basic right of all citizens and then harnessing the power of markets and government to offer a helping hand to those who are less fortunate?

Absolutely nothing. Quite the opposite: that is America at its best.

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