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DAILY POLL

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EDITORIAL

Report shows Americans want health-care reform

The American people are ahead of their politicians on the issue of health care.

A clear majority of Americans who participated in a broad-based study want "universal coverage," according to a new report, although that term means different things to different people.

The Citizens' Health Care Working Group, created by Congress, has 15 members representing consumers, the disabled, business, organized labor, health-care providers and the federal government. It released a draft report last week, and it plans to make recommendations today to President Bush.

Its proposals run contrary in some ways to Mr. Bush's position that consumers should take more responsibility for their initial medical expenses. The Working Group's first recommendation is to "establish public policy that all Americans have affordable health care."

You can read the report at www.CitizensHealthCare.gov, including this apt description of the problem:

"Over the past year, the number of uninsured has grown by more than 1 million, and tens of millions more are underinsured, and at immediate risk of financial ruin if they are seriously ill or injured. Individuals, families, employers, and every level of government are feeling the financial pressure of rising health care costs. More often than not, people do not receive the best care that science has to offer.

"Many are bewildered by the complexity of health care and insurance coverage. As one citizen voiced to us, you cannot

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'navigate the health care system without luck, a relationship, money and perseverance.' "

Americans don't entirely disagree with the president that they must look out for themselves. "People consistently emphasized the importance of shared responsibility and fairness — a clear willingness to pay a fair share, to try to do a better job of taking care of themselves, and to accept limits on coverage if based on good medical evidence," the group reported.

But it noted that many people believe we are now spending enough money to give everyone access to quality care. The problem is that the present spending is inefficient. Also, a transition to universal care will probably require at least short-term additional expenses.

One encouraging observation in the report is that the federal government, as the dominant purchaser of health care, is "well positioned to provide leadership" for change.

In other words, the government has clout if it will use it. But first national leaders must catch up with the people and conclude that universal coverage is the way to go. Once they do so, they can move on to the hardest parts: defining universal coverage and figuring out how to pay for it, if possible by redirecting current spending.

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