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The Pill That Works Is The One You Can Afford

MAY 21ST 2011 BY NEWS

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Calls to improve the efficiency and accountability of our country's health care system aren't new, but they shouldn't always cause political division. The political treatment yields few outcomes and precludes many – including, too often, compromise. Yet good public policy is important to take care of patients. We need a new national discussion about getting the most out of the medicines we consume.

Congress could immediately begin to reduce excessive spending on prescription drugs and help to lower drug premiums for beneficiaries in Medicare and Medicaid. This is possible by increasing the use of high-quality, affordable medications.

The value of expanding access to affordable medications is apparent when consumers pay less over the counter at the pharmacy or pay a much lower co-payment on prescriptions. They immediately become more likely to finish their entire course of treatment, to not split or skip pills, and to consult more frequently with their health care providers.

And for their part, health care providers, as well as purchasers and consumers, also have come to recognize and depend upon the enormous therapeutic and economic value of affordable pharmaceuticals to the nation's health. Everyone understands that affordable pharmaceuticals provide quality medical care, while also enabling investment in other aspects of care: new medical technologies, IT, and innovative therapies and research.

Proper and complete regimens of affordable medicines — whether brand name or generic — keep Americans healthy and stave off costly medical and surgical interventions.

Affordable health care is necessary to expand access to the system to all Americans as well as to reduce the need for expensive treatments of preventable late-stage illnesses and conditions. At a time when changes to Medicare and Medicaid seem imminent in order to secure the future of these programs, why not start with the most reasonable solutions?

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has estimated, for example, that even as little as a two percent increase in generic utilization by Medicaid would save the program more than \$1.3 billion. A 5 percent increase could save nearly \$3.3 billion. With governors across the country being forced to make difficult choices to balance state budgets, billions of dollars in savings are simply left on the table.

Today, thousands of affordable medications are available, and all are manufactured and inspected under the FDA's strict quality guidelines. Such drugs account for 78 percent of all prescriptions dispensed in the United States, yet only 25 percent of all dollars spent on prescriptions.

The non-partisan Congressional Budget Office estimates that dispensing affordable medications reduced total prescription drug costs in Medicare Part D by about \$33 billion in 2007 alone.

As more Americans turn to affordable medications to obtain the beneficial results they have come to expect, our government health care programs should do the same. We must fully realize the enormous therapeutic and economic value affordable medications offer the nation's health care system. It's a worthy and achievable goal.

Jo Ann Emerson, R-Cape Girardeau, represents the Eighth Congressional District of Missouri in the United States House of Representatives.

LAST UPDATED ON MAY 21ST 2011 BY NEWS

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