

Heart of the matter

Cardiologist thrust into center of health-care debate

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After working more than 30 years to expand and improve cardiac care in central and southern Illinois, Dr. James Dove hopes to spend the next year at the heart of the national debate about health-care reform.

The key to devising reforms that will help the nation's 45 million uninsured citizens and bypass the dissension that doomed the Clinton administration's health plan in the early 1990s is to focus first on quality, he said.

"We should design a system that delivers the best care and what the benefits are going to be and then how to pay for that," he told The State Journal-Register in an interview last week.

Dove, 67, the founder of Prairie Cardiovascular Consultants and former president of Prairie Heart Institute at St. John's Hospital, will have a national platform as the new president of the American College of Cardiology.

Dove was installed late last month as president of the 31,500-member physician group, which he has been involved with for 20 years.

Because the college influences doctors who treat heart disease - the nation's No. 1 cause of death - the group can have an impact on trends in medical care that affect millions of Americans. Many of those are baby boomers who are reaching an age when heart problems often emerge.

Dove acknowledged the debate about health care is being driven by cost increases that are causing many people to lose health-insurance coverage.

According to the latest federal statistics, national health spending totaled almost \$2 trillion in 2005 - 6.9 percent higher than in 2004 and accounting for 16 percent of the gross domestic product.

Dove said he doesn't know whether a better-designed universal health-care system would require an increase in taxes and a cut in doctors' earnings. The average salary of cardiologists was \$370,200 in 2006, according to a survey by the Jackson & Coker physician recruiting firm.

"What we have to say is that instead of starting with the cost of a better system, we need to start with the quality of it," Dove said. "People want to have high-quality, appropriate care. I think where we get hung up and defensive - whether we're physicians, hospitals, employers, commercial insurers - is on how the cost is going to be divided up, who's going to be winners and losers.

"We need to get beyond that," he said.

Dove hopes to work with others in the college to influence presidential

candidates and Congress so doctors are included when discussions on health-care reform take place. Former President Bill Clinton's reform plan didn't have enough input from doctors, he said.

"We need to be initiating the reforms," he said. "Some people think doctors have a conflict of interest because they make an income from health care. The fact is, though, our main mission is patients."

Dove said he favors a universal system in which wealthier citizens pay more for health care than those with less income. Congress so far has resisted such a system for Medicare.

Dove doesn't expect major reforms during his one-year term as president of the college.

"We just want to start the dialogue," he said.

He said he doesn't know enough about Gov. Rod Blagojevich's Illinois Covered program to have an opinion on that \$2.1 billion health insurance proposal.

Dove said he also hopes to help the college develop more tools to help doctors comply with national guidelines for treating heart disease.

Dove's patients have included former Gov. Jim Edgar, Sangamon County Sheriff Neil Williamson and the late U.S. Sen. Paul Simon. Dove stopped treating patients at Prairie Cardiovascular two years ago to spend more time on college-related activities and his longtime interest in electronic medical records.

Electronic tools can help doctors reduce "tremendous inefficiencies" in America's health-care system, Dove said.

He still teaches medical students at Springfield's Southern Illinois University School of Medicine.

Prairie Cardiovascular, a 45-member group of cardiologists, has used electronic records for at least seven years.

The college's immediate past president, Dr. Steven Nissen of the Cleveland Clinic Foundation, said Dove is "a real uniter."

"He's a guy who can bring disparate opinions and forces together and get people to listen to each other and work together. And those kinds of skills are invaluable, because as a group, we don't always agree on everything in medicine.

"Springfield should really be honored to have him in this position."

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