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The Health Care Dilemma: Getting everyone to agree

Finding a solution to the issue of health care reform is not easy, and reform proposals abound. But before a solution can be found, the FRESH-Thinking (Focused Research on Efficient, Secure Healthcare) project based at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) thinks it’s important to first identify the elements of a successful U.S. health care policy and then find a policy proposal that best fits those needs.

The project is co-directed by Ezekiel J. Emanuel, an oncologist and bio-ethicist, and Chair of the Department of Clinical Bioethics at the National Institutes of Health, and Victor R. Fuchs, the Henry J. Kaiser Jr. Professor Emeritus, Stanford University, in the Department of Economics and School of Medicine’s Department of Health Research and Policy. They have been working independently on this problem for many years and, in 2005, teamed up with other health care experts to undertake this study.

“It’s true that ‘the devil is in the details,’” says Emanuel. “To get as much input and perspective as possible, we have consulted with health economists, physicians, health services researchers, consultants, government officials, Fortune 500 companies, and health care professionals from other countries. We also held forums to hear from the general public. The current health care system in the United States is deeply and irreparably flawed. But, for a reform proposal to work, it’s imperative that it has the buy-in of all stakeholders. Otherwise, it just won’t work.”

The FRESH-Thinking project recently received grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the Blue Shield of California Foundation to complete their multi-year research effort. The amounts of the grants are $495,972 and $100,000 respectively. The Blue Shield of California Foundation also provided funding during 2006-07. The project findings will be presented at a major policy conference in 2009 that will be attended by policy makers, politicians, health economists, the media, and the general public.

“Although not imminent, we’re confident that comprehensive reform will occur in the U.S.,” said Fuchs. “Our belief is that by studying those issues generic to all reform proposals—whether mandates, single payer, or universal vouchers—we gain a much better understanding of what it will take to create a sustainable, comprehensive, and workable health care policy.”

"We are very pleased to be partnering with RWJF and the Blue Shield of California Foundation in this effort,” said CASBS director Claude Steele. “This long-term, collaborative study is a vital step in the quest for a workable, sustainable health care policy.”

The FRESH project posts workshop papers and commentaries at www.fresh-thinking.org.

The Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) advances research in the humanities and social sciences—research that is influential in U.S. and global intellectual life and has real-world application. Its primary program is an academic fellowship for individuals and for groups studying specific issues. The Center also sponsors summer institutes. For more information, please go to www.casbs.org.