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We can't afford *not* to reform health care

"A billion here, a billion there, and pretty soon you're talking real money."

—Everett Dirksen, US Senator 1951-1969

A month before Election Day, my wife and I were discussing how much fun it is to watch our children wander the globe while we stay home and amuse ourselves with the likes of the vice presidential debate and the government's multi-billion dollar banking bailout.

I have a hard time getting my head around \$1 billion, never mind the \$850 billion in the final bailout bill. To put it into perspective, consider these numbers:

- \$381 billion: Medicare spending in 2006
- \$314 billion: Health care savings from healthier lifestyles
- \$162 billion: Savings from "wired" health care (eg, EHRs, e-prescribing)
- \$125 billion: Annual cost of care for the uninsured
- \$120 billion: Cost of the Iraq War in 2007
- \$120 billion: Cost to fully implement a wired health care system

I cite these numbers to illustrate that the cost of fixing our nation's broken health care system—often viewed as unfathomably expensive—is well within our reach. With the presidential election behind us, it's time to demand that the new administration do the following:

Wire the health care system; double reimbursement rates of primary care physicians; enact tort reform; mandate flexible health insurance for all Americans; and launch a healthy lifestyle campaign.

Wired health care and tort reform—eliminating frivolous lawsuits and defensive medicine—could provide a net savings of \$40 billion and \$200 billion, respectively, according to published reports. The other line items are a wash: savings equal costs. Doubling our reimbursement rates would involve paying less for routine procedural care (eg, cataract surgery) and more for cognitive services (eg, smoking cessation counseling).

We can all quibble about the numbers and the means of achieving these goals. But I think we can all agree that it's time to tackle our health care crisis with the same vigor applied to presidential politics and the search for a fix for our nation's financial follies.

What should be the first step in tackling our health care crisis?

(Visit jfonline.com and vote in our Instant Poll)

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