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STATE OF THE UNION, HEALTH OF THE PEOPLE: DOES ANYBODY REALLY CARE?

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The Center for Medicare Advocacy urges the President and Congress to learn from the mistakes they made with the Medicare prescription drug benefit. “After seeing the disastrous roll out of Medicare’s drug program, designed to maximize individual choice and private plan participation, are we really going to accept the President’s suggestion that we rely on similar strategies to provide health care for younger Americans?” asks Judith Stein, Executive Director of the Center for Medicare Advocacy. “The President spent surprisingly little time talking about health care in his address, an issue of primary concern to everyone, but the ideas he did espouse are more about saving money than getting people health care.”

Buying health care is not like buying anything else. Not shoes, not a car, not even a house. “People go to the doctor and seek medicines and care for their children because they are sick,” says Ms. Stein, “not because they want to try the latest treatment or newest dental technique.”

The President may not have gone to the doctor like the rest of us recently, or gone to pick up a prescription, or needed a dentist for his child. Those of us who have know how expensive this care is and how difficult it is to obtain, even for people with insurance. For the 43 million Americans who have no insurance, for people dependent on Medicare Part D for their medicines, and for people with Medicaid, it is most likely that they and their children will not get their medical care or medications or see the dentist. They will not be helped to get this necessary medical care by tax credits or special savings accounts.

If the aim is really to provide health care, the solution is to look to Medicare’s successes. For forty years the traditional Medicare program has provided access to health care where private insurance failed. It has done so less expensively and more efficiently than the Medicare private plans of the 1990s and the current private drug plans. “Learn the right lessons from Medicare,” Ms. Stein urges. “Provide a simple to understand, uniform set of basic health benefits through a cost effective program that demands the best price from health care providers and administrators. That is the best way to help keep people healthy and the federal budget sound - and good health matters to everyone.”