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Economist: U.S. health system on its last legs

By Michelli Murphy

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Even the most cynical people in Washington believe health-care reform is on its way, said economist and Urban Institute President Robert D. Reischauer in Tucson Tuesday.

With 47 million Americans now uninsured, and 35 million more without sufficient coverage, lawmakers have realized there is no choice but to reform, Reischauer said.

More than 200 people attended the Fathauer Lecture in Political Economy, hosted by the UA's Eller College of Management, and heard Reischauer's take on the economics and politics of health care.

Fixing America's broken health-care system has become more than a "moral imperative," he said, "it is an economic imperative as well."

With 16 percent of the gross domestic product being poured into the system already, reform should be about reallocating the existing funds, he said. It will also require some priority shifting, Reischauer said.

- First, health-care and insurance providers need quality information about how to treat people. An independent institution to evaluate and compare medical procedures and treatments is necessary if quality care is going to be uniformly provided across the U.S.
- Second, consumers need more reliable information about the treatments available to them.
- Third, the U.S. needs to adopt an electronic health-record system.
- Fourth, the payment for medical treatment should be based on the value of the outcome, and not the cost of the procedure.

Reform can only take place if it's a "team sport," Reischauer said.

"Everyone needs to start playing with the same playbook."

- Contact NASA Space Grant intern Michelli Murphy at 573-4197 or at mmurphy@azstarnet.com

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