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Health care reform is focus of conference Friday

By Jim Warren

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National health care reform will be the focus of a daylong conference in Lexington on Friday.

The third annual Conference for Healthcare Transparency and Patient Advocacy will be held at Lexington's Four Points Sheraton, 1938 Stanton Way, starting at 8:45 a.m.

Speakers will include Lt. Gov. Daniel Mongiardo, a Hazard physician; former U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders; Dr. L.D. Britt, regents chairman of the American College of Surgeons; and Regina Herzlinger, author and chair of the Harvard Business School.

Dr. Kevin Kavanagh, a Somerset physician and coordinator for the conference, said it is intended to shed light on some of the issues in the often-heated national health care debate.

For example, conference speakers will discuss Canada's national health delivery system — which often is cited as an example of both the advantages and pitfalls of a government-operated program.

Nadeem Esmail, an analyst with the Fraser Institute in Alberta, Canada, will talk about his work, which he says shows that Canada's system delivers care inefficiently.

He says, for example, that the average Canadian waits 34 weeks for joint-replacement surgery. Esmail says that's because Canada's government program lacks private competition, and that the free care it offers causes demand to outstrip supply.

"Canada's system doesn't guarantee access to care; it guarantees access to a waiting list," Esmail said. Other universal-access programs, such as those in France, Germany and Switzerland do a better job, he said.

Dr. Garrett Adams of Louisville, representing Physicians for a National Healthcare Program, said he'll paint a more positive picture of Canada's system.

Adams, a specialist in infectious diseases in children, favors a national single-payer program for the United States. He contends that the existing market system has "imploded" for many patients. That once applied only to the poor; now it's affecting the middle class, he says.

"I used to live in an ivory tower myself," Adams said. "If you'd asked me how my patients were going to pay for their doctor visits or hospitalizations, I never gave it any thought. But it's critical now."

The conference is sponsored by Health Watch USA, a private advocacy group; the Kentucky Medical Association; Anthem Blue Cross-Blue Shield of Kentucky; and Consumers Union.

Registration costs \$35, including a box lunch. To register, go to www.healthconference.org. For information, call 1-800-679-7426.

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