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Health care reform debated at local conference

By Jim Warren

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Participants at a health-care conference in Lexington Friday got some sharply differing opinions on reforming the nation's health care system.

Dr. Garrett Adams of Louisville told conferees that a national single-payer system would be the ultimate solution, providing quality health care for all, including the millions who now lack coverage.

Adams argued that President Barack Obama should have championed a single-payer plan from the beginning, rather than being "backed into a corner defending weaker and weaker alternatives."

Meanwhile, Twila Brase, president of a market-based health care policy group out of Minnesota, said that if the reform bill passed by the U.S. House last weekend becomes law, patients' rights and privacy will suffer, and the quality of care will decline in a gradual government takeover of the health system.

Brase pictured the bill as bringing "socialized medicine and socialism to the shores of America."

Brase and Adams were speakers at the third annual Conference for Healthcare Transparency Patient Advocacy at Lexington's Four Points Sheraton. The day-long session was sponsored by Health Watch USA, a private advocacy group; the Kentucky Medical Association; Anthem Blue Cross-Blue Shield, and Consumers Union.

The conference was designed to highlight and explain some of the issues in the health care debate, and speakers covered many of them.

Lt. Gov. Daniel Mongiardo, a Hazard physician, said that improved electronic medical record keeping could save lives and millions of dollars nationwide by preventing prescribing errors and other mistakes. Mongiardo also said that the work Kentucky has done on medical record keeping could position the state to become a "national model" for more efficient computerized medial records.

Reforms are needed, Mongiardo said, because the health care system still keeps records much as it did 100 years ago.

No national single-payer plan is likely any time soon. But Adams contended such a plan is needed because reforms envisioned now — which mainly focus on reforming health insurance — don't go far enough. He blamed much of the problem on the health insurance industry which would be replaced by the government under a single-payer system.

"We deserve to be a healthy nation, and we can be, but not so long as we carry the added weight of the health insurance industry," Adams said.

Brase, a nurse who is president of Citizen's Council on Health Care in Saint Paul, Minn., was

equally aggressive in picturing the federal government as the chief reform villain.

She said most Americans "have no idea" what the bill passed by the U.S. House contains, suggesting that they would be shocked if they did.

The bill would require individuals to buy health insurance, she said, and might provide for jailing people who didn't comply. She said President Obama has never actually ruled out that possibility.

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