

Democratic Medicine

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Body

The candidates for chairman of the Democratic National Committee, including Governor Dean, are scheduled to be in New York City tomorrow. The various contenders are talking about leading the party in a new direction. But the most important contest in that regard is the race for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination in 2008, a race that appears already under way. Two possible contenders, Senator Kerry and Senator Clinton, spoke yesterday about health care, on the same day President Bush discussed the issue in Ohio.

Speaking at the Families USA Health Action Conference in Washington, D.C., Mrs. Clinton fell into the Democrats' usual trap of opposing all change, even when it's needed, and employing scare tactics against Republicans. "We are about to experience one of the most aggressive assaults on the structure and funding of public health programs in our history," she said. "And it will take all of us working together to ensure the continuity of these programs."

This "Medi-scare" strategy may have worked for Mrs. Clinton's husband against Newt Gingrich. But as New Yorkers are well aware, Medicaid costs are now driving state taxes higher and higher, and, according to Congress's Government Accountability Office, Medicare is going bankrupt. "The Medicare problem is about seven times greater than the Social Security problem, and it has gotten much worse," the GAO's comptroller general, David Walker, has said. So the status quo just isn't tenable.

It's nice to see Democrats addressing health care, but one could be forgiven for getting a little nervous. After all, the last Democratic effort to fix the health care system, Mrs. Clinton's Task Force on National Health Care Reform in 1993, threw the health care industry into turmoil. Yesterday, Mrs. Clinton seemed to promise more of the same. "Just a little over 10 years ago, we tried to have a conversation about health care, and it was a difficult conversation, and I bear the scars to prove that," she said. "But it is time for us once again to confront the issues."

Mr. Kerry, meanwhile, is pushing the same ideas he advanced during his losing campaign for president: expanding the Medicaid program and paying for it with new taxes on the rich. As Mr. Kerry noted yesterday at the Families USA conference, the Democrats spoke about health care often during the campaign. One Democratic candidate, Howard Dean, was himself a doctor. But their ideas failed to gain traction. So Mrs. Clinton isn't learning from her disastrous task force - she spoke yesterday of "other countries" that provide health care "through the entire society" - and Mr. Kerry hasn't learned from his electoral defeat.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bush is advancing a bold, consumer-driven plan for health care: health savings accounts, association health plans, and modernizing health care with information technology. Mr. Bush wants to do something about the medical malpractice lawsuits that are driving up health care costs and that lead doctors to practice costly "defensive medicine" because of the threat of litigation. Mr. Kerry and Mrs. Clinton have mostly left that issue alone for fear of offending the trial lawyers, a key Democratic constituency.

Whatever the outcome of the race for DNC chairman, if the Democrats are to get back to winning, our sense is that they are going to have to come up with something better on the health care issue than what Mr. Kerry and Mrs. Clinton had to offer yesterday.