

From [*The Town Talk*](#):

Louisiana's Vitter backs 'insurance associations,' prescription drug imports

By Roy Pitchford

August 9, 2009

PINEVILLE -- U.S. Sen. David Vitter told an audience of just under 1,500 people Saturday that he is "totally and unalterably opposed" to health care reform legislation proposed in Congress, but he said he has some ideas of his own on the subject of health care, and discussed three of them.

The Louisiana Republican spoke at what was billed as a town hall meeting at Louisiana College's Guinn Auditorium. It was a friendly audience but there was little chance for disagreement to be expressed.

The panel of speakers all joined Vitter in opposing the reform package being debated in Congress. Questions from audience members were screened and selected in advance of the event.

Vitter said he wants to allow the creation of "health insurance associations" with authority to act across state lines to negotiate lower health insurance premiums.

While some such organizations now exist, Vitter said, they cannot "legally act across state lines."

He said a restaurant in Pineville with 10 employees doesn't have a lot of bargaining power when seeking health insurance for its staff, but said it would be different if they could join thousands of other businesses in an association organized by a national restaurant association.

Vitter also said he favors legalizing the re-importing of safe, effective drugs, in an effort to lower the costs of prescriptions.

Mention of that idea was the only time Vitter aroused any opposition from the very supportive audience, as he drew some spontaneous comments suggesting that the government might not be able to guarantee the safety of drugs brought in from other nations.

Vitter said "large pharmaceutical companies" now charge different prices for the same drugs in different countries, with customers in the United States paying the highest costs.

He said he would only favor importing drugs which were monitored "from manufacturer to delivery."

Vitter also called for programs to promote preventative medicine and healthy living, saying activities like smoking and conditions like obesity drive up the cost of health care.

The senator told the audience that the proposed health care legislation would require employers to offer medical insurance to employees, or pay a \$750 per-employee, per-year penalty.

Because of the high cost of health insurance, Vitter said he believes many employers would pay the penalty, rather than provide insurance.

Vitter also assembled a three-man panel who spoke and answered questions.

Alexandria physician Jay Badeaux called for targeting specific programs, rather than an overhaul of the existing system, saying he feared a government-controlled system would not be efficient or effective.

He said current systems like Veterans Administration hospitals and state-operated hospitals are often "slow and ponderous," and said he favored a market-driven approach.

Badeaux also endorsed control of medical tort lawsuits which he said increase costs in several ways including over-use of medical tests in so-called defensive practice, higher insurance premiums for doctors and higher costs of treatment due to the number of tests often used on patients when doctors already "have a good idea" of the patient's problem.

He also said he feared government supervision of medical practice would limit access to health care.

Grocery store owner Reggie McDaniel of Columbia said that he, like most people, wants better health care, but said that should not be something we should expect the government to do.

McDaniel said he offers health insurance to employees, but said many of them, especially younger people, don't use it.

Saying he doesn't want "a government bureaucrat to come between me and my doctor," McDaniel said Congress should "only fix what's broke," and not attempt massive change.

Jeb Bruneau, of the Louisiana-based Pelican Institute of Public Policy, said the administration proposal tracks a comprehensive health plan in Massachusetts which he said has raised insurance premiums, increased the state government deficit and raised treatment costs, while leaving many people still uninsured.

He called for measured study of existing problems and seeking "market-oriented solutions," rather than adopting "bad changes."

When Vitter began addressing written questions from the audience, Dr. Bradley Toucet said that there are not enough primary care doctors.

Vitter called such doctors a necessity for an effective health system, but said they are not compensated as well as specialists. He said a system must be devised to encourage doctors to entire primary care practice,

In response to questions on the cost of health care insurance, Vitter repeated his call for insurance associations and endorsed health care savings accounts which he said will reduce personal taxes and allow people to opt for insurance plans which have higher deductibles and thus cost less.

Vitter took time to address a statement that President Barack Obama often repeats, that if people like their present health plan they can keep it.

He said that is true, but said he fears that if employers have the choice of spending thousands of dollars per employee for health insurance or paying a few hundred dollars for the non-insurance penalty, they will quit providing insurance and a public plan will soon be the only survivor.

Vitter corrected some in the audience who said they fear that Medicare would be abolished, but said he believes Medicare funds will be raided to help fund health care reform, and said that could ultimately affect the care received by Medicare patients.

And while he stopped short of repeating statements by some Republican members of Congress that the plan would allow government officials to restrict or deny treatment to elderly people based on age and predicted benefit, he said such a plan already exists in several countries, including England.

Some of those present referred to news coverage of unruly town hall meetings in other places, and said he had been advised to have "security" for his meetings.

"I told them the best security is to do what the people want you to do," Vitter said, drawing a round of applause.