

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Panel discusses prospects of Obama's health care policies

By [Lindsay Toler](#)

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COLUMBIA — With 46 million Americans living without health insurance and another 25 million underinsured, health care policy and reform have become a major focus as the leadership of the country changes.

[The Association of Health Care Journalists](#) held an online panel Friday asking Karen Davis, president of [The Commonwealth Fund](#), and Sheila Burke, a lecturer in public policy at Harvard University, whether President-elect Barack Obama's health care plan stands a chance.

"We do have an economic crisis, but we also have a health care crisis," said Davis, who runs a private foundation that promotes better access, quality and efficiency of health care, particularly for society's most vulnerable. "I think this is the time to invest in health care."

Because Obama's plan for reforming health care has yet to be explained in detail, Davis and Burke focused on the direction they thought health care could take.

Davis said she thought Americans would see some of the "building blocks" of Obama's campaign promises come about during his first year as president, especially health care coverage for low-income children. She also said Obama was likely to introduce legislation on health care early in his term.

The importance of working with legislators on this issue as early as possible is a major lesson from the failed health care reforms of the Clinton administration, Burke said. "Timing and collaboration with the hill — allowing the bill to do what it does — is critical," she said.

In terms of insurance coverage, Obama stressed during his campaign that he wanted to provide coverage for those without insurance as well as lower premiums for the insured.

In order for that to work, the panelists said, all Americans would be required to have health insurance. "Then the question is," Burke said, "do you subsidize?" Both panelists agreed that

the government and employers would have to “do their part” in helping lower-income Americans afford obligatory health insurance.

But if all Americans are in the market for health insurance, Davis said, insurance agencies would have to reciprocate by covering all applicants, regardless of their previous conditions. “They have to take everybody, whether they’re healthy or sick,” she said.

Both panelists agreed that the major players — insurance industry leaders, physicians, politicians and pharmaceutical representatives — needed to reform health care, and they are showing a willingness to work with the upcoming administration. “I think there’s an opportunity here,” Burke said.

To watch the online panel discussion, go to the association’s [Web site](#).

For more on how the Obama administration could learn about health care from European countries like the Netherlands, go to the Missouriian’s health blog, the [Daily Dose](#).