

Trump nominee reaffirms support for assault on Medicare and Medicaid

Zaida Green**19 January 2017**

Republican Representative Tom Price, president-elect Donald Trump's nominee to head the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), reiterated his intention to repeal Obamacare and his support for the dismantling of Medicaid and gutting of Medicare, in testimony before the Senate Wednesday.

Over the course of the nearly four-hour confirmation hearing, Price made clear his intent to keep unfettered the right of the healthcare industry to profit from mass suffering, calling for the transformation of Medicaid into a state-run program funded via federal block grants and refusing to commit to maintaining any of the minimal patient protections afforded by the Affordable Care Act, generally referred to as Obamacare.

Speaking before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, Price gave few details on the Republicans' plan to replace Obamacare. While claiming, "Nobody is interested in pulling the rug out from anybody," Price refused to give a timetable or any other specific details on a substitute health plan, suggesting that any replacement legislation would be implemented piecemeal, leaving open the possibility that the 30 million people who have gained minimal health care coverage through the ACA's exchanges and Medicaid expansion could be left stranded without health insurance for an indefinite length of time.

Price, who was chairman of the House Budget Committee, refused to commit to Trump's repeated campaign promise that his administration would not impose any cuts to Medicare and Medicaid, claiming that dollars were "the wrong metric" to measure resources for patient care. The Empowering Patients First Act (EPFA), the legislation which Price proposed in 2015 to replace the ACA last year, would cut \$449 billion from Medicare and \$1.1 trillion from Medicaid over the next decade.

Price gave vague and non-committal answers to questions about whether replacement legislation would maintain the limited protections afforded by the ACA, such as the prohibition on lifetime caps on most benefits; the requirement that insurance companies not exclude coverage for pre-existing conditions; the requirement that health plans include benefits such as mental health care, emergency services, and prescription drug coverage; and the right of young people to receive coverage from their parents' insurance plans up to the age of 26.

All of Price's answers amounted to variations on the themes of "patient choice" and the freedom "for every American to access the type of coverage they want." In reality, this is the "freedom" to be either sucked dry by insurance companies for minimal coverage, to pay even more for comprehensive coverage, or to gamble on health and go without any coverage at all.

On the other hand, Price spoke sympathetically of the insurance companies preparing the premiums they would levy on patients in 2018, saying that "What they need to hear from all of us, I believe, is a level of support and stability in the market."

Senate Democrats mounted a cynical assault against Price, citing Trump's lying promise about not touching Medicare and Medicaid and repeatedly asking Price if he would uphold it, thus presenting the billionaire president-elect as sympathetic to these government-run health insurance programs, and giving themselves a pretext for collaborating with the new administration.

Democratic Senators Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Al Franken of Minnesota referred to the billionaire real estate mogul's recent comment that his administration would give "insurance for everybody", and attempting to wring out of Price a commitment to Trump's supposed promise.

Senator Bernie Sanders, the self-described “democratic socialist” who ran for presidency in the Democratic primary, urged Price, “Will you work with us on this?” as he questioned him on whether he would support the opening up of a market to cheaper imported prescription drugs.

The Democrats also criticized the blatant conflict of interest in Price holding investments of hundreds of thousands of dollars in pharmaceutical and medical device companies as he introduced bills that would boost the profits of these companies.

One senator, Democrat Christopher Murphy from Connecticut, pointing worryingly to the financial backgrounds of the rest of Trump’s cabinet, said, “I raise [these conflict of interests issues] because I think there’s great concern ... [among] Americans that this whole administration is starting to look like a get-rich scheme.”



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