

Beyond the bites: Real discussion needed

A panel of hospital executives visited the Green Bay Press-Gazette editorial offices Thursday, making a case that what America needs is a thoughtful discussion about health-care reform, not more sound bites.

But the week was filled with sound bites and not much thoughtful discussion. The Obama administration went back and forth about what was perceived as backing away from the idea of a "public option," a government insurance company designed to compete with private insurers. There was talk of public health cooperatives replacing the public option in the legislative package now being assembled.

Because the legislation is still evolving, we're not ready to support a move to back away from the public option

altogether, but the hospital executives raised some legitimate concerns.

Stephen Brenton, the president and CEO of the Wisconsin Hospital Association, is organizing meetings between newspapers and hospital executives across the state to make sure the CEOs' position is part of what he described as "a pretty complicated debate, with a lot of red herring and a lot of emotion."

President Barack Obama launched this debate in Green Bay on June 11, holding up Northeastern Wisconsin as a place where high-quality care is provided at a price that is significantly lower than the rest of the nation.

Therese Pandl, the newly in-

stalled president and CEO of St. Vincent and St. Mary's hospitals, said the various town hall meetings and listening sessions, and the president's emphasis on the issue have been useful in raising awareness of the how many variables need to be addressed.

"I think we all agree that the system is broken and we need reform. But it is a complicated issue, and people listen in sound bites. This isn't a sound-bite issue," Pandl said. "The need for reform is critical, but the components are also critical, and giving enough thoughtful time and discussion to it is crucial, too."

Bellin Health President and CEO George Kerwin said reform is alive and well and happening every day as providers seek better ways to care for their patients. Those providers have not been as engaged in the political debate, Kerwin said, "because we're very busy trying to take care of people and trying to focus reform on taking care of people."

In an ideal world, the political debate and providers' efforts to preserve quality and value will dovetail nicely and real reform will happen nationwide, Kerwin said.

"What we're concerned about is the opposite doesn't happen — the political activity doesn't crash into what we're doing successfully here, especially in the state of Wisconsin, and cause us to fall back

in our efforts," he said.

Hospitals are wary of a "public option," Brenton acknowledged, because the existing public programs — Medicare and Medicaid — do not adequately reimburse providers for the cost of their services, and those costs must be shifted, that is, added to the bills of patients with private insurance.

"We're afraid the public option might exacerbate that shift," Brenton said.

The needed discussion is well under way; the challenge for health consumers, providers, legislators and the general public is to look past the sound bites and listen to that discussion. Kerwin is right: Any deterioration in the quality of health care already being provided in Wisconsin would be a tragedy.

