

Health care panel takes Columbia's temperature

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The Columbia Political Union brought the hot-button issue of health care reform to campus on Tuesday evening.

A panel discussion featuring Dr. Michael Sparer, Professor and Department Chair of Health Policy and Management at the Mailman School of Public Health, Iman Hassan, CC '10, of Student Health Outreach Program (SHOUT), and Elizabeth Lamoste, CC '10, of Project HEALTH, navigated underrepresented and practical issues concerning the health care reform debate to a packed house in Hamilton Hall.

The event came at an appropriate time. On Nov. 7, the highly debated health-care overhaul legislation, called the Affordable Healthcare for America Act, was passed by the House of Representatives by a slim margin of 220-215 votes. If passed in the Senate and signed into law, the bill pledges to insure an estimated 45-50 million uninsured Americans. Yet at a \$1.2 trillion price tag that critics fear is unaffordable and not sustainable, its path in the Senate is unclear.

Taking the floor first, Sparer set out to contextualize what he described as a “historic and yet very fierce debate” in clear and non-partisan terms. Aside from the aspects of the bill most often covered by the media, such as instituting the “public option,” or government-sponsored health insurance, mandating coverage on the part of employers or individuals, and various paying strategies, Sparer also addressed the broader issue of implementation. “Lurking in the background is the debate of how to systematically reform the entire health care delivery system, a system that is currently expensive, inefficient, and riddled with problems.”

Student leaders Hassan and Lamoste also lent their opinions on the pragmatism of the bill and how it would effect their organizations SHOUT and Project HEALTH respectively. As a campus coordinator for SHOUT, an organization that educates families about health insurance availability, Hassan expressed concern for how various components of the bill would affect the low-income communities her organization works with. The Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which provides coverage to millions of children and teens, is not renewed under the new House bill. Set to expire in 2013, the elimination of CHIP will require families with children to pay for insurance at market prices, a cost Hassan is concerned might prove too high and cause millions of children to lose coverage.

With a Senate health care bill expected to come out soon and a combined bill far in the future, Hassan said, “We don’t really know what the final bill is going to look like.”

Lamoste of Project HEALTH, an organization dedicated to breaking the link between poverty and poor health, also voiced concern for how the insurance bill would translate into health care services. “The uninsured population does not have much political clout as is and are often ignored in mainstream debates. We tell our volunteers to do the best you can with the infrastructure you’re given and hope that what comes out of Congress will be beneficial to the clients.” In response to a question about the costliness of preventative treatment, Lamoste responded, “We’re working the numbers and trying to make things affordable, but in the end, health is about individuals, it’s about people.”

The discussion is the latest initiative on the part of the Columbia Political Union to engage the Columbia community in a dialogue about current political issues. Earlier this semester, the CPU also hosted a debate between the Columbia University College Democrats and the Columbia University College Republicans about health care reform, and engaged in discussion about the cover story of the “Columbia Political Review” about health care in San Francisco. General Manager Sajaa Ahmed, CC ’10, said that providing comprehensive information, such as the background pamphlets handed out at the beginning of the evening’s panel, was a way to counteract coverage that Ahmed called “passion, not politics.”

Since 18 to 25 year-olds are the fastest-growing uninsured age group in the country, the health care debate has direct relevance for Columbia students. “The debate we’re having now is extraordinarily important,” Sparer said. “This is not only a debate about health care, it’s a debate about what kind of country we are.”