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Obama Moves to Reclaim the Debate on Health Care

By [SHERYL GAY STOLBERG](#) and [JEFF ZELENY](#)

WASHINGTON — [President Obama](#) tried on Wednesday to rally public support for overhauling the nation's health care system and said for the first time that he would be willing to help pay for the plan by raising income taxes on families earning more than \$1 million a year.

"If I see a proposal that is primarily funded through taxing middle-class families, I'm going to be opposed to that," Mr. Obama said in a prime-time news conference in the East Room of the White House. A surcharge on the highest-income Americans, under consideration in the House, "meets my principle," he said.

On a day when the leader of fiscally conservative Democrats said a deal was a long way off and House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) insisted that she had the votes to push a bill through, Mr. Obama used the news conference to take his message over the heads of lawmakers and straight to the public. Conceding that "folks are skeptical," he sought to convince Americans that overhauling the nation's health care system would benefit them and strengthen the economy.

"If somebody told you that there is a plan out there that is guaranteed to double your health-care costs over the next 10 years," he said, "that's guaranteed to result in more Americans losing their health care, and that is by far the biggest contributor to our federal deficit, I think most people would be opposed to that,"

"That's what we have right now," he said. "So if we don't change, we can't expect a different result."

While Mr. Obama declared, "it's my job, I'm the president," he did not use the appearance at the White House to make any fresh demands on Congress, which is struggling to meet his timetable for both chambers to pass legislation before members break for August recess. Mr. Obama did not repeat that demand Wednesday night.

Instead, he sounded cerebral as he delved into policy specifics for nearly an hour and tried to link them to the concerns of ordinary Americans.

As he sought to reassure the public that a new health care system would be an improvement, he also acknowledged that there would be changes that could be unsettling, a point that is often raised by critics of overhauling the health care system.

“Can I guarantee that there are going to be no changes in the health-care delivery system? No,” Mr. Obama said. “The whole point of this is to try to encourage changes that work for the American people and make them healthier.”

Health legislation is Mr. Obama’s highest legislative priority, and his success or failure could shape the rest of his presidency. But while he is under increasing pressure from leading Democrats to delve more deeply into the negotiations by taking positions on specific policy issues, he largely resisted doing so Wednesday night.

But the president did weigh in how the government might pay for the plan.

In addition to saying he would be open to taxing those households earning more than \$1 million — a scaled-back version of an earlier proposal that would have imposed a surcharge on households earning \$350,000 or more — he signaled that he was also receptive to another idea under consideration in the Senate: taxing employer-provided health benefits, as long as the tax did not fall on the middle class.

On Capitol Hill, Ms. Pelosi said Democrats remained on track to reach a deal on major health care legislation. But she acknowledged that the process had slowed in response to concerns among conservative Democrats about the cost of the bill, and that some House Democrats were reluctant to embrace the income surtax on high-earners without knowing whether the Senate would go along.

Indeed, even as Ms. Pelosi insisted that Congress was closer than ever to achieving a comprehensive overhaul of the nation’s health care system, leaders of the Blue Dogs, a conservative faction of Democrats, said a deal was still a long way off. Asked if the House Energy and Commerce Committee could resume work on the bill by late Thursday, as House leaders hoped, Representative Charlie Melancon, a Blue Dog from Louisiana, said: “No way.”

A senior Democratic aide on Capitol Hill said party leaders now believed it was essential for Mr. Obama to be more specific about what he wanted in a health care bill — and not just exhort Congress to pass one.

“The president needs to step in more forcefully and start making some decisions,” said the aide, speaking on condition of anonymity because he did not want to be publicly identified as criticizing Mr. Obama. “Everyone appreciates the fact that Obama has devoted so much time to health care. The bully pulpit is powerful. But in view of the deadlines Congress has missed, we would like to hear more from the president about what he wants in this bill.”

While he faces pressures from fellow Democrats, Mr. Obama is also fending off attacks from Republicans who sense an opportunity to knock him off his stride by arguing that the health care bill, estimated as costing more than \$1 trillion over the next decade, will not slow or reduce the growth of health spending.

The White House has been in a running debate this week with Senator Jim DeMint, Republican of South Carolina, who predicted that health legislation would prove to be Mr. Obama’s “Waterloo moment” and would break the president. To that, Mr. Obama said: “This isn’t about me. I have great health insurance, and so does every member of Congress.”

In his opening remarks Wednesday night, Mr. Obama said he was aware that many Americans are asking, “What’s in this for me?” But he also tried to appeal to the nation’s conscience, casting the issue as a matter of urgency to families who are losing their life savings trying to pay for medical care and to businesses burdened by trying to provide coverage to their employees.

Asked what the rush was to meet his August deadline for passage of House and Senate bills, Mr. Obama replied: “I’m rushed because I get letters every day from families that are being clobbered by health care costs. They ask me, ‘Can you help?’ ”

In fact, there is another reason Mr. Obama is rushed: he knows time is not on his side. The more Congress delays passage of a health bill, the more time his Republican opponents will have to marshal their opposition and kill it.

“If you don’t set deadlines in this town, things don’t happen,” Mr. Obama said. “The default position is inertia.”

David M. Herszenhorn and Robert Pear contributed reporting.

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