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Interview With John Edwards September 24, 2007

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JACKIE JUDD: Senator Edwards, thanks for joining us on Health08.org today.

FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): Thanks for having me.

JACKIE JUDD: Before we get to the specifics of your healthcare reform proposal, let's talk about the philosophical underpinning, your philosophical approach to healthcare policy. What is it?

FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): That, as a moral issue, everyone in America should have healthcare coverage. There shouldn't be any distinction between one American and another about who has healthcare coverage, so universal coverage.

Second, we have to do something serious about to rein in healthcare costs, which I think are out of control.

Third, on the big debate that often exists in my party, which is between single-payer healthcare versus a continuation of the private system. I have decided to let that debate take place in real life, in real time, and let Americans decide which they think makes the most sense as they choose their healthcare plan.

JACKIE JUDD: Well, discuss your plan for a moment so people can understand what you mean by that kind of middle ground that you're at.

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FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): Basically, what my plan does is it mandates coverage. There's an individual mandate that everyone has to be covered. There is an employer mandate. It basically asks responsibility from everyone concerned. The employers continue to play an important role, individuals play a role, and the government plays an important role – all three are critical.

JACKIE JUDD: And if a small business, for example, could not afford or could not find a policy for its employees, they would pay into a fund?

FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): Correct, but remember that the employees of small businesses also have access to the Medicare choice. Remember, there continue to be multiple choices. I actually believe that in my plan the two greatest beneficiaries are, number one, the uninsured and, number two, small businesses because small businesses today have huge problems with providing healthcare for themselves and for their employees because they have no market power. The result is that they pay the highest possible premiums. We're going to give them market power.

JACKIE JUDD: But for those small businesses that, at the moment, don't offer any coverage, they probably don't feel like they would win in your plan because they would end up paying more, something that they're not paying more.

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FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): I would respectfully differ with that. I think they will feel like they win. The vast majority of small business owners that I have run into in the country want, number one, to have healthcare for themselves and, number two, to have healthcare for their employees. They just can't pay for it. The result is that they have trouble attracting people. They have trouble keeping good people. What this does is it eliminates the burden for most of the employees and it reduces it dramatically for the employers.

JACKIE JUDD: When I heard you in the presidential forum downstairs, here in the Kaiser building, it seemed to me that you were almost suggesting that this is something of an experiment, what your proposal is, and at the end of the day we could very end up with a single-payer plan if that's what the American people decide they want. Is that a fair description?

FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): I don't think I would use the word experiment because experiment suggests that you're going through a process to determine what's going to happen. There are some dramatic, bold reforms in this proposal at the very outset, such as coverage for everybody, significant reduction in costs, filling gaps that exist in today's healthcare system, preexisting conditions are no more – they're banned as a matter of law – mental health parity, chronic care, preventive care, long-term care are all covered. They're all

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huge. Every one of those things in isolation is a huge issue in today's healthcare system. People will be able to take their healthcare with them if they move or change jobs. Job lock is an enormous problem in today's healthcare system. Those things are all being dealt with head on.

There is a modeling of the question of whether private versus government plans are more cost efficient and provide better care. On that issue, Americans will, over time, make the decision. I think the problem with describing it as an experiment is that it fails to recognize all the dramatic reforms that are instituted originally, including universal coverage.

JACKIE JUDD: Would you like to see the trend, though, move towards a single-payer plan?

FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): I don't want to make that choice. I want Americans to make that choice. I certainly have no objection to single payer as a philosophical matter. Medicare – many Americans are very happy with Medicare, with some exceptions, such as the problem with drug costs, et cetera. The administration cost associated with Medicare is significantly smaller than private insurers, about 3 or 4-percent. So there are real advantages in the government plan, but what we're going to find out over time is whether the American healthcare consumers believe that they're better than the private plans.

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JACKIE JUDD: I have heard you say on the campaign trail that the way to go is not incremental steps – it's time to be bold on the subject of healthcare reform.

FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): Yes.

JACKIE JUDD: But, as you know more than most, there is a huge gap between what a candidate can talk about and what a president can deliver. So what is negotiable for you? And second, how do you break the traditional political log jam and get something bold going?

FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): The better way to describe it is what is not negotiable. Universal is not negotiable. High quality of care is not negotiable. Significant cost reductions are not negotiable. Those things have to all be part of whatever proposal is signed into law, so those are not negotiable. The specific mechanics of some of the details – nobody made me the God of healthcare. I've spend a lot of time on this, I've thought about it a great deal and I think my proposal makes a lot sense. But, in dealing with the Congress, there are minor things about the mechanics that need to be negotiated, we'll negotiate about that. If somebody wants to negotiate about universal or quality of care, though, that's not negotiable. That has to be true.

JACKIE JUDD: And those are the big-ticket items, universal care, cost of care and access to care. So how do you break the political log jam?

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FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): Because the mistake that has been made in the past is the mentality that exists in Washington. And unlike President Carter, who came in completely from the outside, I've been here. I know how the Congress works. I know how the Senate works. I know what the relationship is between the Congress and the president. But the mentality that exists in Washington is that you negotiate with the entities and the interests in Washington and come up with a proposal that you then present to America. I just think it's backwards. What you do is you make the case to America about what needs to be done. You shouldn't ignore and can't pretend that the rest of the country that the rest of the country exists and should have voice in their own healthcare system.

I use as an analogy something that's happened recently, which was that there was broad support for this war in Iraq. That support has consistently eroded until it's now an unpopular war. So, if you look at what's happened, it's not like the Congress has led on this. The Congress has followed because the American people are demanding change, and now even Republicans are demanding a different course in Iraq. Exactly the same thing, except easier, would happen with healthcare. That's when the leader of the country, supposedly George Bush, is leading in the wrong direction. Suppose the President of the United States is actually saying to America, this is what

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we need to do. We need universal healthcare. We're going to cover everybody. You still have choices. We're going to bring costs down for everybody. And convinces America about the need for this – when that happens, the politicians will follow. There's absolutely no doubt about that. I have a very different perspective and mentality about how to get this done than some others.

JACKIE JUDD: You like to, on the campaign trail, tell some personal anecdotes of people who you've met who've struggled with healthcare. I'm wondering if you and your family ever did. As a child, was your family ever uninsured? Did you or your mother or your father ever lack for healthcare because you didn't have the money? Did it ever happen to you?

FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): In a different way, not in the way you're describing, but healthcare has been an issue in my family when I was growing up, for a long time, for a lot of my growing up years because my father had a heart condition for a long time. And when he left the mill – he worked in a mill all his life – it was because the cost of treating his heart condition, particularly if he needed surgery, was so overwhelming. My mother, who ran a little business – she refinished furniture – had to give up what she loved. She had to give that up and go back to work in the post office.

JACKIE JUDD: To get insurance?

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FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): To get insurance so that my parents would have healthcare coverage. And so I saw it up close in my own family, how it drove the decisions about what my mother and father would do.

JACKIE JUDD: And did that impact where you are today?

FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): Oh, of course. I've through not only that, but even what I've gone through with Elizabeth. Keep in mind that we now have everything and we have great healthcare coverage, but when Elizabeth was getting her chemo we would get these statements from the insurance companies – both lawyers and a presidential candidate, so I think most people would recognize that Elizabeth's pretty smart – and you couldn't make heads or tails out of these things. I just couldn't help but think to myself that most Americans get these statements and they have no idea what to do. It looked to me like they were covering treatment one month and not covering it the next month. Your option is to spend years fighting with the insurance companies about this stuff? That's why I think that, both in my childhood and in a very different way even as an adult who has good healthcare coverage, I've seen firsthand the problems.

JACKIE JUDD: I want to ask you about two more subjects, kind of separate from reforms specifically. The first is Medicare. Baby Boomers, here we are. We're coming

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there. What do you see as the biggest threat to the financial viability of Medicare as Baby Boomers age?

FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): The biggest threat is that it runs out of money. The question is what do we do about it? We know that Medicare is financially sick, much sicker than Social Security. We know that the demands on it are high and unfortunately we came along and added a prescription drug law that did not address, in a serious way, cost. The result is many Americans don't get the prescription drugs that they need, we haven't taken on the insurance companies in a serious way to bring down costs.

So I think there are a lot of things that we need to do about Medicare. I think it's analytically a mistake to separate Medicare from universal healthcare because they are completely connected. The savings in a universal healthcare system dramatically affect Medicare for multiple reasons. People are better taken care of as they enter the Medicare system, especially if we make some of the changes that I've been proposing, for example, creating a medical home for those with chronic conditions. Chronic conditions account for way over 50-percent of healthcare costs in this country and we don't have a medical home, we don't have a coordinator. People who are getting a multitude of healthcare don't have anyone to make sure they're getting the right healthcare or getting it in the right place, all of which should be done. Anybody in

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Medicare who has a chronic condition ought to have one person they go to who makes sure that they get to the places they need to go.

And prescription drugs, which we spoke about in the forum also – the idea that we didn't use the power of the government to negotiate better prices for prescription drugs is completely unacceptable and, given the cost of prescription drugs, is insane. We should be using the power of the government to negotiate better prices. We ought to do something about drug company advertising. There are some limitations on what we can do, but we should be aggressive about it. And we ought to allow prescription drugs into this country from Canada.

JACKIE JUDD: One final question and that has to do with AIDS. You've announced a program about AIDS, not only domestically, but internationally. The question I would have is this. There are some reports that have shown that, while treatment is getting to more and more people in Africa and elsewhere around the world, our prevention efforts are lagging. So what kind of emphasis would you place on prevention?

FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): I would put enormous emphasis on prevention, both here and abroad. I would not impose the ideological limitations that we have seen in the Bush administration. I think science-based teaching, education, both here and abroad, age-appropriate sex education.

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I have proposed in this country – and I know this is somewhat controversial – that I think needle exchange programs can help the spread of AIDS and that we should not have a ban on needle exchange programs. I also think that worldwide, instead of requiring FDA approval for drugs that we're using in developing countries, we should use the World Health Organization, which is quicker, makes it easier to get these drugs out and I think that standard has worked. It's safe and it's more efficient for people who need treatment, so I think all those things. America is going to have to invest more significantly than we have in fighting AIDS around the world.

JACKIE JUDD: Did you put it at \$50 billion?

FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): I did.

JACKIE JUDD: Final word. Thank you very much, Senator. I appreciate it.

FORMER SEN. JOHN EDWARDS (D-N.C.): Thank you very much.

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