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Sebelius: 'Disingenuous' for Supreme Court to overturn insurance subsidies

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MILWAUKEE -- Former U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius told WisBusiness.com on Tuesday it would be "disingenuous" for the U.S. Supreme Court to conclude that health care subsidies under Obamacare are illegal in three dozen states, including Wisconsin.

"I hope the court will read the law in its whole and rule that what was intended is clearly what was set up," she said in an interview in Milwaukee.

Sebelius was in town to address the Rotary Club and to meet with a group of medical students. Sebelius' sister, Ellen Gilligan, is president and CEO of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation.

If the court rules otherwise, Sebelius predicted, it'd be "the fastest track to a single-player plan."

"Insurance companies in those states immediately (would be) in terrible trouble," she said. "They will suddenly have a situation where about half of their new customers drop out. The people who will stay by hook or crook are older and sicker and desperately need that coverage, and you suddenly have a so-called death spiral where you have a risk pool that is unbalanced. It would impact everybody because all rates are determined as a risk pool. Even if you're not buying through the marketplace, your insurance is suddenly going to skyrocket."

While addressing the Rotary Club, Sebelius blasted Congress for continuously blocking medical research funding at a time when health crises -- and medical advancements -- have a major impact across the world.

"I was into my job for an hour when I learned how connected we are globally," said Sebelius, a former Kansas governor appointed to the national health position by President Obama in 2009 at a time when an H1N1 flu outbreak was occurring in Mexico and other nations.

"The health security of the United States is only as strong as the health security of all nations around the world," she said. "We're connected by the food we eat, the water we drink and the air we breathe. In the 21st-century world, we are not insulated by two oceans or by the border crossings to our north and south."

"On any typical day one million people get to the United States by land, sea or air," she said, of the ever-increasing risk of Americans being exposed to infectious diseases. "About 80 percent of the seafood we eat comes from outside our shores; 50 percent of the fruits and vegetables served in the U.S comes from outside our borders. Should we invest our resources investing in a global pandemic after it's underway or is it better to try to stop an outbreak at its source before it becomes a pandemic?"

Sebelius delivered the Rotary Club's annual Dr. John R. Petersen lecture on Tuesday.

Asked by a member of the audience if the U.S. might be losing its medical research edge, Sebelius replied, "I can't think of a time when it's been more important to increase funding for research. But we continue to have a Congress that loves to talk about how much they love research and how important the National Institutes of Health is, yet will not fund it. Each and every year, the president recommends increases and each and every year they're not funded. We'll not only lose our edge, but we'll lose generations of scientists who will find something else to do.

"Linked closely to that is our ridiculous immigration system where brilliant scientists and researchers are educated here and yet can't stay here and work," Sebelius added. "Why we don't staple a green card to everyone's degree as they graduate from an American university, I have no idea."

Sebelius said nations that lead health care advances will profit economically.

"Advancements by any of us are advancements for all of us," she said. "It's been suggested, in the new, knowledge-based global economy, that it will be those countries and companies which lead in life-saving and planet-saving innovation that will ultimately emerge as economic winners as well."

Sebelius said the U.S. should not only lead, but learn from other countries' successes.

"A number of the European nations have lowered their smoking rates to single digits," she said. "We're still at about 15 percent of smokers, including adults and kids. We're trying to import some of (Europe's) strategies ... including using advertising and social media messages that seem to be effective."

She said the U.S. lags badly in maternal health and that "our infant mortality rate makes look like a developing country." But she said truly developing countries - - where poor families lack computers and TVs -- have thought to use text messaging to spread health education.

-- *By Kay Nolan*
For WisBusiness.com