

8/31/93
Cham Drug Stores Conference

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Room 8/31/93

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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

August 31, 1993

REMARKS VIA SATELLITE BY
FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
TO THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
CHAIN DRUG STORES CONFERENCE

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you very much. Good morning. Although I cannot be there with you in person, I am so pleased to have this opportunity to speak with you. I want first, however, to acknowledge the work of the Community Retail Pharmacy Health Care Reform Coalition, formed earlier this year by the National Association of Chain Drug Stores and the National Association Retail Druggists, led by Ron Ziegler and Charlie West. Both of them have been, along with other representatives, very helpful in the work that we have been doing together for the last months.

In fact, when I was listening to Ron introduce me, I remember that one of the first bills that I reviewed in looking at everything that had been presented to this country in terms of trying to provide universal health care coverage in a cost-effective way for every American was one that was drafted back in the early 1970s.

Ron, you may remember that.

We have been at this effort a very long time, and I think now thanks to the work of many of you and others we are on the brink of really being able to deliver quality health care reform to our nation.

The principles developed by the coalition on behalf of 62,000 community retail pharmacies and 112,000 community pharmacists have been especially helpful to the Administration's efforts to reform this system. I also want to acknowledge the pharmacy educators who were there with you in attendance today. The contributions of pharmacy educators and retailers to a reformed health care system becomes even greater when all of you and us work together.

Year after year, pharmacists are ranked the most

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trusted professionals. A recent survey found that to be the case once again. Why is that? Well, as you know, it is because the local pharmacist is always available to help people take care of minor medical problems and answer questions about medications. They, you are often the first to know that a patient is not feeling well or is having a problem with their medications. You interact with physicians to alert them to these problems and help detect and avert medication difficulties.

The pharmacist is often the most accessible health care professional in the whole health care system. Since pharmacists are too often underutilized in our health care system, the President's plan will call for integrating pharmacy services as much as possible into the health care delivery system.

We know that you are not to blame for skyrocketing medication prices that have increased three times the rate of inflation for the past 12 years. And we know it is not the problem of the manufacturers who have to look into the eyes of older customers and explain that prices have gone up; you do that.

Recent data shows that retail pharmacists only make on average about 50 cents for each prescription they dispense, over 70 percent of the costs of each prescription goes to the drug manufacturers, the rest goes to the pharmacists. But they often do not even put that into their pockets. Most of that goes to paying for salaries, rent, and other costs of doing business.

Pharmacy is certainly one of the most efficient providers in the entire health care system, and I have seen that in many visits to pharmacies around the country, in many conversations with pharmacists who have appeared on panels and in forums that I have been privileged to attend. So I know that you are on the front lines of health care, and you often know better than others that change is needed.

The American health care system is, without doubt, the finest in the world for those of us who can afford it, and we must protect that system and its quality vigorously. But as fine as it is, let's be honest with each other. There is a lot that's wrong. We know that many local community pharmacists, for example, are getting hit from all sides -- mail order, dispensing physicians, third-party programs -- while the drug industry continues to rack up record-breaking profits.

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The retail sector is just barely getting by. Retail pharmacies, however, have to do a better job of selling their services to health care plan administrators. The future of pharmacy lies in your ability to provide services, not just drugs.

Under the President's health care reform package, we will level the playing field. We recognize that many manufacturers don't offer you the same discounts they offer to other large purchasers. This obviously has put you and the patients you serve at a disadvantage. To address this situation, we are developing policy approaches that ensure that discounts are given for true economic reasons, rather than just the class of trade the purchaser represents. So it won't or shouldn't matter if you are an HMO, a pharmacy, or a hospital. If you produce the same economic advantages to the manufacturer, you will get the same discount.

The President's plan will also have a Medicare drug benefit and a universal prescription drug program. This means more Americans, but particularly older Americans, will be coming into your pharmacy to have their medication needs met.

We also want to recognize the value of pharmacists under Medicare for their counseling and talking with many patients who you know often stand a lot longer at your counters discussing their health problems with you than any other professional they will see.

Now, many in our country may see health reform as a threat, but for pharmacy it is an extraordinary opportunity. Pharmacists are essential in helping to control drug expenditures and assuring that patients receive the best medicine at the lowest cost.

I predict that health care plans will be turning to pharmacists to help them manage their overall drug budgets. In order to make reform happen and to make reform successful, we will need your help. As trusted health professionals, you are essential to this process. We will need you to join together with us to support the changes we need for our businesses, for our communities, and for our country.

There are no easy fixes to the health care problems that confront us. If there were they would have been agreed to a long time ago, but there are answers. You have helped

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us to work through some of those answers that will directly impact on pharmacy. You have helped us to understand clearly the role that you now play and the enhanced role that we see you playing in a system that delivers care more efficiently to all Americans.

When the President comes forward with the full details of his plan later in September, it will be clear that we have heard and heeded the counsel that you and your representatives have given us. But we will also need you to stand with all professionals and all consumers who know that the time for change is now. We will need you to talk to your customers, to your friends, and to your neighbors about what you see every day.

I want to close with a story that made a very big impression on me. During the time that my father was in the hospital last spring before his death, I had an opportunity to talk to many, many health care professionals in the hospital in Little Rock where he was because I spent hours and hours there every day.

One of the people I had a long talk with was the pharmacist who works in the hospital whose concern was that he saw many patients leaving with prescriptions that he knew they could not afford to have filled. He talked about the problems that faced him as a pharmacist in a hospital, and his friends and colleagues who were retail pharmacists outside.

I will never forget him telling me that oftentimes drugs are the most cost-effective way of treating the illnesses that an individual has, but it means nothing to an individual who does not have access, whose insurance won't pay, who can't afford to co-pay, who can't afford to meet whatever that need is.

You know those stories. You tell them to each other. I hope you will tell them to the country. We want you to be full partners in making a health care system that all of us are proud to be a part of.

Thank you all very much.

(The teleconference was concluded.)

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