

Kerry Hits Bush on Drug Costs - Washington Post - 19 Aug 2004

By Lois Romano

DERRY, N.H., Aug.19 -- John F. Kerry brought his health care message to this New England community Thursday, criticizing President Bush for prohibiting cash-strapped seniors from importing cheaper prescription drugs and for not staying ahead of escalating medical costs.

"George Bush has had four years to talk to you about health care. He's had four years to prove to you that he's got a plan," Kerry told more than 100 people gathered for what his campaign bills as a "front porch" neighborhood visit.

Kerry ridiculed Bush for saying on Wednesday that the administration is studying importing prescription drugs, after having opposed it. "He can't even make up his mind about importing drugs," Kerry said, using language similar to that used against him by Bush for waffling on issues. "Either you're for importing drugs from Canada, or you're not. . . . Do you think he's reading the polls?"

White House spokesman Scott McClellan, at Bush's Texas ranch, sidestepped a question about whether importing drugs would hurt U.S. pharmaceutical companies, some of whose employees and officials are significant donors to Bush. "Right now we cannot assure the safety of these drugs that would be imported in the United States. It's a safety matter," McClellan said.

Kerry's appearance in this New England town appeared to be what campaign dreams are made of -- set against a pale yellow colonial house surrounded by rustling, towering trees and with a lawn full of people with hardship stories to tell.

Thomas Dunseath Maher, a retiree whose wife died Monday, told Kerry that for two years, he spent \$25,000 a year out of pocket for her cancer therapy because of the deductibles and exclusions on his policy.

Also there was a young mother and nurse who said she has shopped all over the state for independent health care insurance to cover her son who has Down syndrome, only to be turned down.

Kerry pledged to lower costs and provide good health care in a state that has some of the highest rates in the country. While historically Republican -- Bush won New Hampshire by 1 percent in 2000 -- the state could go either way in November, according to polls.

As Kerry was pitching his health care plan to those on a front lawn here, he also seemed to be trying to reach the undecided voters who might be watching him on local news. "I want independents and Republicans to listen carefully to this, because if you run a business, you ought to be leaping to support my plan," he said. "This not a government plan; this a private sector incentive plan."

Kerry cited a report he commissioned that links the job market with rising health care costs. He said at the International Association of Fire Fighters convention in Boston earlier in the day that employers are eliminating jobs that include costly health care coverage and

replacing those workers with part-time help, for whom they do not have to provide coverage.

The Democratic nominee said he would offer employers tax credits for employee health plans, and that the government would cover as much as 75 percent of an employer's insurance costs for catastrophic care, which would save families an average of \$1,000 a year. Tax credits would be given for health care to small businesses and to people between 54 and 65, as well as to low- and middle-income workers who choose to join the plan used by members of Congress.

As he does for many his proposals, Kerry said he would pay for the new benefits largely by rolling back Bush's tax cuts for the wealthiest 2 percent of Americans.

In a statement released by the Bush-Cheney campaign, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), a physician, said: "Senator Kerry is ignoring the fact that his proposals would not address health care costs. Instead, my colleague would shift the lion's share of the cost to American taxpayers and place restrictive mandates on employers."