

TIMES-HERALD

August 12, 2009

Discussion interests local residents

By Tony Burchyns/Times-Herald staff writer

BENICIA - When Glenn Wickens was a boy, no one he knew had health care.

Growing up in the 1930s and 1940s in Vallejo, he said he almost died of pneumonia - twice.

But the 77-year-old retired Mare Island machinist overcame those scares to finish school and join the military. During his long career, Wickens said he was fortunate to obtain good, steady health care.

"Everyone should have that opportunity," Wickens said. "Other countries have had public health care for years. Why can't we do it here?"

As the nation's leaders continue to debate President Barack Obama's health care plan, Wickens and other Bay Area residents say they're following the discussion with keen interest.

"My argument is ... everyone's going to have to pay for it one way or another," Richmond resident Tony Satterfield said as he waited Tuesday for a friend to be treated at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center-Vallejo's emergency room.

Satterfield, who said he works for the U.S. Postal Service, said he's not entirely satisfied with his health plan. He said he's mostly concerned about how much he's paying - and whether he'll have coverage if he gets sick and really needs it.

Dr. Alison McCormick, an associate professor at Touro University in Vallejo, said she's "very supportive" of national health care reform. But McCormick said she worries compromises Congress would make will undermine the program's effectiveness.

"If they end up with a plan that doesn't include a public option, then they compromised more than they should," said McCormick, who in 2008 was part of a team of scientists who published a paper claiming the first successful clinical trial of plant-made cancer vaccines in humans.

"There are many people in the Bay Area who are unemployed and uninsured," McCormick said. "And it costs far more to go to the ER than to receive preventative care."

McCormick said insurance costs are rising for people with plans partly because hospitals need to cover their hidden costs, including emergency-room walk-ins.

Still, convincing people who already have health insurance and are happy with their plans that an overhaul is necessary remains one of Obama's toughest challenges.

Vallejo resident Bob Williams said he's happy with his plan, which provides ongoing treatment for a work-related back injury.

But Williams said he wouldn't be opposed to an overhaul as long as he could get the same level of care he gets now.

"We still need health care reform, but the question is when," Williams said. "I think we'll see big debate after big debate ... and it will get stuck in a quagmire in Congress."