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Health card raises public concern: Privacy

Debate could bog down reform plan

By Judi Hasson
USA TODAY

A "health security" card that guarantees every American access to medical care is a key piece of President Clinton's health-reform plan.

So is computerization of everyone's medical records to streamline paperwork. But the combination is raising questions that could set up roadblocks to passage of the plan.

Chief among them: Will Big Brother — or anybody else — be watching when you go to the doctor? Who will be able to find out that you are being treated for cancer or drug abuse? The answer, some say: Anyone working in a doctor's office or hospital.

Some privacy experts warn that the health-care system is ripe for abuse as technology takes over.

"You run the risk of making records vulnerable, not only to people getting access outside the system, but people within having easy access," says JanLori Goldman of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Testifying recently before Congress, she warned that any health card should be used only to prove you have coverage and "any other use strictly prohibited."

Clinton's health advisers agree. They say the health security card intends to do just that.

"The card is your guarantee that you have access to those benefits. It's a symbol of the guarantee. If you lose the card, you still have the guarantee," says White House health adviser Walter Zelman.

The card, Zelman says, won't be used for anything else.

Civil libertarians want to make sure that promise is kept — that it won't be a national identity card used to single out illegal immigrants.

Privacy experts also warn that centralizing the medical system would leave it wide open. Under the Clinton plan, health records will be computerized within health plans; there will be no central system.

But if a patient from New Jersey were injured in Oregon, an emergency room would be able to call up medical records across the country by computer.

The health-reform legislation contains provisions imposing penalties for the unauthorized use of medical records. But that may not be enough to put the public at ease.

A Louis Harris poll of 1,000 people in July and August found people are worried about protecting their medical record privacy.

► 85% said protecting people's medical records is essential in health reform. They made it a priority ahead of providing health insurance for those who don't have it.

► 75% were concerned "that a computerized health-care information system will come to be used for many non-health care purposes."

► 11% of those surveyed said that to protect their confidentiality, they had not filed insurance claims for medical bills; 7% said they didn't seek medical care for a physical condition because they didn't want to hurt their job prospects.

But 84% supported the idea of a national health insurance card, and 67% would like to use their Social Security number because they don't want yet another number cluttering up their lives.

"People need something concrete to deal with their health-care insecurity," says Harvard health policy expert Robert Blendon. "The health card is a symbolic example of what it's all about."

Some critics say the card is almost useless.

Without information that could help save a person's life, "it's a very serious waste of time and money," says Janet Sayles-Falls, executive director of the Smart Card Industry Association, which advocates putting a consumer's entire medical record on a "Smart Card."

"A consumer's medical history is going to be in a big data base in the sky. The consumer doesn't have hands-on access to their information without having to go through that computer," says Sayles-Falls, whose fledgling industry could make millions of dollars if its version of computerized cards is adopted instead of the administration's much more limited card.

Counters White House health adviser Zelman: "You can make a logical case for putting certain things on this card, but we're going to err on the side of caution. We're very, very sensitive about putting anything on this card that might be in some way be misused."

Others call the card a gimmick.

"It's a cute device," says GOP

health adviser Gail Wilensky. "It doesn't get at the fundamental issue — who is going to pay for what and how we are going to control costs. And it raises serious privacy issues."

As the ability to computerize records expands, it's imperative to protect privacy, says the American Medical Association's Donald Lewers.

"People must have confidence," he told Congress, "that they can speak to their doctors without that information being broadcast."

And other issues relating to the card and the medical system in the computer age remain unanswered.

What number would be on the card? Privacy experts are emphatic the health security card shouldn't carry a Social Security number.

"The public is nervous about a national health ID number," says Columbia University privacy expert Alan Westin.

In fact, opponents of using Social Security numbers say they are used too frequently as identifiers for driver's licenses, credit cards, bank cards, library cards, electric bills.

Almost anyone, they argue, can find your Social Security number and misuse it for access to bank records, credit cards and other fraudulent purposes.

A working group at the Justice Department is studying privacy issues and what kind of number to use on the health card.

The decision is likely to be left up to Congress.

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Hot topics: A trace of his troubles

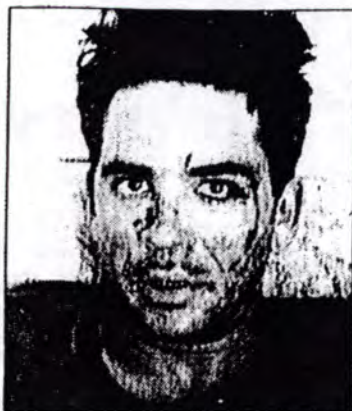
Defense Secretary Les Aspin came to the post after eight years as chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. Though well-versed in defense issues, his tenure has been troubled:

► **Gays in the military:** Days after the inauguration, an Aspin memo to Clinton became public in which he urged a six-month delay in lifting the ban on homosexuals. Clinton had pledged an immediate end to the ban. In July, Aspin recommended Clinton allow homosexuals to serve as long as they make no public or private declaration of their orientation. Gay leaders reacted angrily.

► **Somalia:** Aspin rebuffed military requests for extra armor in Somalia before an Oct. 3 firefight in which 18 U.S. soldiers died. Military leaders later said the armor wouldn't have made a difference, but GOP members of Congress called for his resignation.

► **Haiti:** U.S. ship in Haiti in October turned back by mob. Word leaked Aspin opposed mission, embarrassing White House.

► **Aspin's health:** Hospitalized in February after suffering shortness of breath linked to a heart condition, then again in March; a pacemaker was installed. Aspin said there was "no question" that he would be healthy enough to



CNN via AP

SOMALIA CRISIS: Pilot Michael Durant, captured in October

serve his full four-year term.

► **Pentagon downsizing:** Aspin fought with OMB director for \$50 billion to cover inflation and pay raises.

► **Roof repairs:** Aspin said he'd pay only \$390 of the government's \$3,105 cost to repair roof on his Washington, D.C., house. Repairs were needed to protect \$165,000 in government communications and security equipment installed in his attic.

► **Personal travel:** On a May trip to discuss Bosnia-Herzegovina with NATO officials, Aspin spent several days vacationing in Venice with a female friend. The five-night vacation cost taxpayers \$42,000 for food and lodging and other costs for his entourage.

In November, Aspin crossed a picket line to catch a flight — two days after Clinton pounded unions in a NAFTA vote.

Around the world and in Russia: Dread, dismay, scorn, praise

Vladimir Zhirinovsky's meteoric rise in Russia's parliament election is touching off fear because of his threatening, racist and anti-Semitic statements. Worldwide reaction Wednesday:

► **President Clinton:** "I think plainly we have to assume that this is primarily a protest vote. ... But I think we should continue to support reform in Russia."

► **Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev:** "If Zhirinovsky continues with his ill-considered approaches and his fascist-style statements, I will never hold out my hand to him."

► **German Chancellor Helmut Kohl:** "There are sounds coming from people in Russia from whom we thought had long ago disappeared in the garbage heap of history."

► **Latvian President Guntis Ulmanis:** "There is no cause for panic."

► **Gennady Lednev, a Russian analyst of military affairs:** "The army voted for Zhirinovsky to sound a loud protest against the policies of the current government. That's understandable because the army really is in bad shape."

► **Vice President Gore:** "The views which he has associated himself are reprehensible. ... If you want a lab test ... then look at Bosnia."

► **Olga Roltman, 33, beautician in Moscow:** "It will push more Jews to leave. ... Zhirinovsky is a real new Hitler."

► **Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres:** "What I can say to all Jewish people is that their place is here."

► **Estonian President Lennart Meri:** "Developments in Russia have come as a great shock to Western Europe and to the West in general, especially to the 25,000 Sovietologists in the

United States who were unable to predict this."

► **Jack Matlock, former U.S. ambassador to Russia:** "Essentially, his philosophy is one of hatred: ethnic hatred, and also an attitude that Russians are entitled to dominate others. He does obviously have a certain gift for hitting the nerve. ... He offers simplistic solutions."

► **Sen. Frank Murkowski, R-Alaska:** "It may be the Christmas season, but no one is going to give Alaska as a gift to Russia."

► **Alevtina Fedulova, leader of the Women of Russia party:** "We see many constructive ideas in the program of Zhirinovsky's party. ... But of course we do not share their methods."

► **Tatyana Chikanova, 36, Moscow library clerk:** "God has given us Zhirinovsky to save Russia from destruction. ... He will go down in history as one of the finest men who ever lived."

Tests spread radioactivity in air, on ground

By Katherine Rizzo

The federal government dropped radioactive material from planes and spread toxins on the ground as part of secret post-World War II weapons tests, according to documents released Wednesday.

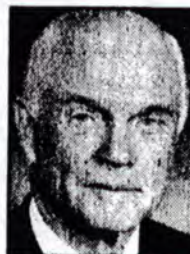
The dozen covert experiments, from 1948 to 1952, included four radiation air drops over New Mexico in which pilots chased fallout clouds to track movement.

Eight tests were done in Tennessee and Utah, Sen. John Glenn, D-Ohio, said in releasing a secret General Accounting Office report.

In one test, pilots tracked a radiation cloud 70 miles downwind over a sparsely populated area from Los Alamos to Watrous, N.M. Another cloud was tracked 10 miles, Glenn said.

In six tests in Dugway, Utah, radiation was dropped from 15,000 feet to see how far it spread once it hit the ground.

And in 1948, radiation twice was emitted on the ground at the Old Atomic Energy Commission in Oak Ridge, Tenn.



GLENN: No reason for secrecy

"There is no justification for the government to keep this information secret," said Glenn, chairman of the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee. "And there is no justification, except in extreme wartime conditions, for the principle of informed consent to be abandoned."

Energy Department officials had no comment but said Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary backs a right-to-know attitude when it comes to the public.

Wednesday's disclosure comes eight days after O'Leary acknowledged the government conducted 204 nuclear weapons tests from 1963 to 1990.

Glenn said eight of the tests were part of an attempt to design a weapon that could spread radiation around a limited, tightly controlled area. That research ended in 1954.

Most tests were conducted in government areas, but the report was unclear whether radiation from two New Mexico tests exposed civilians.

And there was "no documentation of potential health effects," the report said.

Still, the report confirmed

what environmentalists had been speculating about the extent of government experiments following the Manhattan Project, which developed the first atomic bombs.

"This is the first solid evidence that there was a systematic radioactive warfare program," said Arjun Makhijani of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research.

"There had been indications that the military considered radiation warfare to be very important after the war, but no indication of thorough and systematic planning like this," Katherine Rizzo writes for The Associated Press.