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From IowaPolitics.com...

-- Former House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt, D-Missouri, said on Iowa Press today that he is in favor of a public option and he hopes it stays in the final health care reform bill, but that is not a sticking point for his support of the legislation.

"It is not, in my view, a litmus test," Gephardt said. "You can have a bill that does good things without a public option. I just think it's better to have one. It provides some competition. It provides an alternative for some people that wouldn't be there, in some cases, without it."

The 14-term congressman made universal health care a center piece of his 2004 presidential campaign, but now lobbies for health industry giants like the UnitedHealth Group, the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America and the Council for American Medical Innovation, among others.

Gephardt brushed aside questions regarding his representation of those companies, saying "any company has its critics," that he tries to get involved with issues he was involved with when he was in Congress, and that the groups he represents are for health care reform -- if not a public option or the proliferation of generic drugs.

"They obviously have views on different parts of it, but their general support, unlike what happened in 1993, has been vital to getting this bill done," Gephardt said.

-- Gephardt said he has been impressed with President Barack Obama so far, but he is concerned "there are no really smart, good answers" on some of the issues he faces abroad in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.

"I worry that no one can deal with the magnitude of these problems, and we just get so critical of anybody that's president because they aren't hitting grand-slam home runs every day on every issue," Gephardt said.

He also said Obama has done a good job with health care reform, bringing all parties to the table and allowing time for the 535 members of Congress to craft a bill.

"I think the president has done a really good job of staying out of Congress's way, giving them general direction, not being highly specific and also getting some of the big stakeholders like the doctors, like the hospitals, like the pharmaceutical companies to be supporters this time when last time they were all against it," Gephardt said.

Finally, Gephardt said "it would sure help" Obama politically if he could sign a health care reform bill before the midterm elections in 2010 – a strong message from a leader that failed to pass a bill on the issue in 1993.

-- Gephardt, chairman of the Council for American Medical Innovation, said his group is pushing for better science education, regulatory reform at the FDA and better research collaboration between private industries and the government.

"If you're going to have a more efficient health care delivery system, which is what we all want, you've got to have more new answers to dread diseases like cancer, like Alzheimer's, like Parkinson's," Gephardt said.

He said if answers to those problems are found then money can be saved and the public health can be bolstered.

Gephardt also said he was "elated" and "thrilled" when he learned that the U.S. House passed its health care reform bill, and he believes some kind of bill will be passed soon.

"I'm optimistic that it will (pass), maybe early next year, but I think in this period of time it will be done," Gephardt said. "In 1993 when I was leader of the House with the Clinton health care plan, I couldn't get it out of committee."

-- Gov. Chet Culver appeared today with Gephardt in downtown Des Moines to call for a greater focus on medical innovation and to announce "Innovate Iowa," a year-long program aimed at building on the existing alliances between agriculture, education and research in successfully targeting job creation.

"As a candidate for governor, I promised to lift the ban on stem-cell research and I did so," Culver said. "Now, the world-class researchers at our state universities can conduct potentially life-saving research, working on cures for illnesses like cancer, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease."

Gephardt touted Iowa as a great place for this research. "Iowa is a great place to come to learn what you've done, to learn what needs to be done, and to come up with the best and the brightest ideas for how to move this agenda forward," he said. Gephardt also shared the story of his son Matt, who at the age of 2 was diagnosed with terminal cancer but who is alive because of medical innovation and research.

The group declined to attach a dollar figure to the Innovate Iowa program, although Gephardt said Congress has spent \$30 billion a year for the past decade for such research. Similar programs have been launched in Wisconsin, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Michigan and California. A major conference on the subject is planned for January 2010 to explore research ideas.