

Comic treatment for health plan

MIT econ whiz's hip idea to explain overhaul

By Christine McConville / The Pulse

Tuesday, February 8, 2011 - Updated 2 hours ago

The MIT economics whiz who crafted President Obama's national health-care overhaul now plans to explain the complex and controversial plan to the masses — in one long comic book.

Jonathan Gruber, a nationally recognized health economist who devised the economic underpinnings of Obamacare (Gruber hates the term), said his three comic-loving kids encouraged him to use the hip format of the graphic novel — basically an expensive comic published in book form — to tell the story of the complicated plan to 300 million Americans.

Unlike most comic books, Gruber's won't have a superhero like Batman or Captain America or a villain like the Joker, he said.

"I'm going to use the facts to tell the story," Gruber, 45, told the Pulse yesterday. "I'm the narrator guiding the reader through the law. It'll have lots of pictures and text."

Hill and Wang, a division of publishing powerhouse Farrar, Straus and Giroux, plans to release Gruber's book, tentatively titled "Health Care Reform: What It Is, Why It's Necessary, How it Works" this fall.

It's an unusual venture for Gruber, a brilliant Massachusetts Institute of Technology academic and a key architect of Romneycare, who spent much of the last decade telling national leaders why the American health-care system is broken, and how to fix it.

Now Gruber is breaking down the president's 2,400-page legislation into illustrated, bite-sized panels for non-wonks who either don't understand or don't like the national plan.

"There's a fundamental lack of economic security in our country," Gruber said. "If you don't get insurance from your employer, you are one bad gene, or one bad car accident away from losing everything."

The graphic novel is an increasingly popular way to tell complex stories, according to Gruber's editor Thomas LeBien, who has used the format to explain the U.S. Constitution and Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"It's a marvelous medium," LeBien said. "There's a long tradition of turning to them to take complicated information and render it accessible to the widest audience."

But when LeBien first approached Gruber last summer, the busy professor almost turned him down flat.

“I just wasn’t sure if this would be useful enough,” Gruber recalled. “Then my wife and kids said, ‘You’re crazy. You’ve got to do this.’ So I decided to give it a shot.”

Even one of the national health plan’s fiercest critics, Michael F. Cannon of the free market Cato Institute in Washington D.C., tipped his hat to Gruber’s comic book.

“I’ve got to hand it to him,” said Cannon, the think tank’s director of health policy studies. “It’s a brilliant idea.”

Gruber said he will illustrate how the president’s plan will lower health-care costs and end discriminatory insurance practices that make it much harder for sick people to get coverage.

“My family made me realize that there’s such a misunderstanding of the bill, and that it’s important to explain why we need this, and what it does,” he said. “I’ve found that when people understand it, they like it.”