

# Health care 'rationing' sounds scarier than it is

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If you've been paying attention to the health care debate, you've no doubt heard these buzzwords from opponents of the Democratic plan:

Rationing. Euthanasia. Death panels. Socialized medicine. Canada and Britain.

They have been written on posters, yelled at town hall meetings, and repeated by politicians during TV talk shows. They are scary words. (Well, maybe not "Canada," but in the context of "The health reform plan will give us a system like Canada's," it's certainly meant to scare.)

These words have dominated much of the debate. But how much do they really have to do with what's actually being proposed in the health care bills in Congress? According to our research at [PolitiFact.com](#)., not a whole lot.

At [PolitiFact](#), we've fact-checked several claims involving rationing, a loaded term if ever there was one. We concluded that Republicans are wrong to suggest there's no rationing today but would be under President Barack Obama's plan, but also that Democrats are wrong to say there would be no rationing under his plan.

Health care experts on both sides told us we have rationing now, and we would have it under the Democratic plan.

Public and private plans have limited resources, and you can't just get any medical service you want anywhere at any time. That's rationing. It's a reality of health care today and would be under any of the plans being considered in Congress.

And so we gave a False to former Democratic National Committee chairman Howard Dean when he said the plans include no rationing. And we gave a False to House Minority Leader John Boehner of Ohio, who said research on the cost-effectiveness of treatments would be used to ration care.

"This whole notion of rationing as it applies to a public option, I think, is really ridiculous," said Judith A. Stein, director of the Center for Medicare Advocacy, a group that helps seniors get care under the federal program. "It is what insurance is. Right now, Congress and any health care plan 'ration.' No health insurance I know pays for 'whatever it costs.'"

And you can bet people who can't get health insurance due to a pre-existing condition feel like there's already rationing. Ditto for those who can't afford health insurance. Proponents of the health overhaul plan — which seeks to provide basic coverage to everyone, regardless of whether they have a pre-existing condition — argue that it would clearly reduce that form of rationing.

John Holahan, director of the Urban Institute Health Policy Research Center, said he has not seen anything in any of the plans that will result in explicit rationing, but "if you define rationing as 'people can't get everything they want,' it's true. But it's also true today."

Interestingly, he said that Medicare is much less likely to deny a health service than a private insurer.

"That's the argument you hear people making (that the health care overhaul would lead to government rationing)," Holahan said. "But I think they have it backwards."

But Republican strategist Frank Luntz has advised GOP members to use the word "rationing" to build opposition to the Democratic plan.

In a memo called "The Language of Healthcare 2009: The 10 rules for stopping the 'Washington Takeover' of Healthcare," Luntz devotes a whole section to how the word can be used.

"The word 'rationing' does induce the negative response you want, but what you really want audiences to focus on is the 'consequences of rationing,'" Luntz wrote.

Luntz notes that " 'rationing' tests very well against the other health care buzzwords that frighten Americans." Asked what two concepts or phrases would frighten them the most, "health care rationing" ranked at the top of the list with 43 percent (well above other buzz phrases like "socialized medicine" at 26 percent and "Hillary-Care" at 10 percent).

But it isn't enough to just say the word "rationing," Luntz wrote. It is much more effective to personalize the concept by saying, for example, "The government will decide what treatment I can or can't have."

Warnings about "death panels" and euthanasia are the offspring of those rationing claims. We looked into the "death panel" claim, introduced by former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, and concluded she was wrong. We also debunked repeated claims that the plan includes euthanasia. The plan would authorize payments to doctors to give elderly and seriously ill patients end-of-life counseling, but that counseling is voluntary. And it's ridiculous to say that's euthanasia.

The AARP has been inundated with calls from concerned seniors who have been misled by these buzzwords, said AARP spokesman Jim Dau.

Debate is good, he said, but it's important that people's opinions be based on facts. And a lot of the scare words have no place in a reasonable debate about health care reform, he said.

"In politics, it's always easier to scare someone than it is to educate and engage them," Dau said.

At PolitiFact, we don't want to hinder the robust debate on such an important policy issue. But we're in the fact-checking business, and we felt it was important to highlight some of the more blatant distortions that have dominated much of the discussion, and that distract from real issues in the health care debate.

And what we found: Rationing is just a fact of life in a world with limited resources.

Or as Michael Cannon, a health policy expert with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, puts it: "Asking if there will be rationing under the Obama plan is like asking if there will be gravity. It is ubiquitous and unavoidable."

The statement

"There's no rationing in any of these bills."

— **Howard Dean**, former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, on Aug. 9 on ABC's *This Week*

**The ruling**

Rationing is a fact of life in a world with limited resources. Through caps and limits, there is rationing in health care, and there would be if health care bills pass. Dean's statement is False.

**The statement**

The health care bill's plan for comparative effectiveness research "would be used by the government to ration care."

— **House Republican leader John Boehner** of Ohio on Aug. 18 in a news release

**The ruling**

It's a stretch to equate "rationing" with giving patients better information about which treatments and drugs are most effective. In fact, there's specific language in the bill to prevent that. Boehner's statement is False.

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