

Washington State's Patient Choice Initiative Defeated

BUT FAILED EFFORT HAS CREATED A "POWERFUL COALITION"

Editorial Staff

David Butters, DC, chairman of the Patient Choice Coalition: "People were very confused about the intent of the initiative."

The Washington state Health Care Choice Initiative (I-673) was soundly defeated Nov. 2: 33 percent for; 67 percent against (please see "Health Care Choice Makes Ballot in Washington State" in the August 25, 1997 issue). Many political experts and media representatives acknowledged that a contributing factor to why voters turned down the measure was because of the confusing ballot title of I-673. The wording of the title came from the office of the state's attorney general.

"The ballot title referred to the regulation of health plans, but did not specify any of the concepts that we have been promoting, especially the idea of patient choice," said David Butters, DC, chairman of the Patient Choice Coalition. "As a result, people were very confused about the intent of the initiative, and the standard response when voters are confused is to vote 'no'."

Several polls conducted by media outlets just before the election confirmed that voters didn't understand the ballot title. However, when pollsters described to voters the intent of the initiative - that it would allow people to choose their doctor or keep their current doctor if they changed jobs or insurance plans -- a majority of those polled favored the initiative.

Dr. Butters acknowledged that it was difficult to overcome the resources of the insurance industry, which raised nearly \$2 million to fund the opposition campaign. Calling themselves the Coalition for Affordable Health Care, opponents barraged voters with television and radio advertising and slick brochures that claimed the initiative would raise health care costs and reduce quality. In addition, opponents worked hard to discredit the role of the chiropractic profession in promoting the measure, claiming it was simply a special interest ploy by chiropractors to increase their incomes.

Despite the defeat of Initiative 673, efforts by doctors and patients in the state of Washington to expand their health care choices, and to take more control over their health care decisions, will continue.

"We plan to build on that momentum by continuing to network with the other health care providers and patients who supported our issue," said Dr. Butters. "We have created a powerful coalition that can influence change in many ways, and we need to take advantage of that.

"I want to sincerely thank everyone who worked so diligently to support this initiative by educating their patients, distributing fliers in their communities and donating money to support us. I believe that our grassroots efforts helped us to offset the negative portrayals and spread the word about the importance of patient choice," he added.

I-673 began as a bill introduced by former State Rep. Tom Campbell, DC, to the Washington state

legislature, with support from a broad-based coalition of health care providers and consumers. When the bill stalled in committee and it became clear that it would not progress to a vote, supporters decided to file a citizen's initiative to the legislature and began gathering signatures. That initiative fell just short of obtaining enough signatures to qualify it for introduction to the legislature, which prompted the Patient Choice Coalition to immediately file it as an initiative measure to the people. The coalition was able to obtain more than 241,000 signatures of registered voters to qualify it for the general election ballot.

While chiropractors contributed about 75 percent of the \$400,000 raised to support the initiative, the remainder of contributions were made by individual health care providers from other professions, independent pharmacies, attorneys, liability insurance companies, unions and consumers.

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