

Idaho won't expand Medicaid. Wink wink.

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

That's some cynical game Idaho's Republican leadership is playing in Boise.

It plans to expand Medicaid coverage to about 100,000 of Idaho's impoverished adults.

Not now.

Next year.

By then, the dummies in the GOP primary election will have been lulled to sleep by Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter's promise not to implement this feature of the dreaded Obamacare. There will be fewer Tea Party members motivated to challenge incumbent lawmakers in the closed GOP primary - and those who do won't have the Medicaid issue at their disposal. Even the base, suffering from what journalist Jonathan Alter calls "Obama Derangement Syndrome," can't get worked up over a vote that hasn't happened.

Yet.

But it's coming.

If you have any doubts, consider Health and Welfare Director Richard Armstrong's presentation last week to the House Health and Welfare Committee. Among this group, it's common knowledge that Idaho is taking a bath by covering the medical bills of Idahoans deemed unable to pay them. Through the medically indigent program, counties pay about \$35 million, covering the first \$11,000 of each claim. After that, through state taxes, the Catastrophic Health Care fund picks up the rest, about another \$35 million. Initially, Obamacare would cover 100 percent of the cost of extending Medicaid to this same population, and never less than 90 percent.

As the Tribune's William L. Spence reported, Armstrong threaded the political needle by outlining the so-called Arkansas plan, whereby Medicaid expansion dollars would be used to purchase private health care insurance for the poor. "From 2016 to 2020, we estimate the indigent fund will pay out about \$425 million," Armstrong said. "There are some costs associated with the private option, but we'd still save more than \$100 million and it would mean 100,000 folks would have insurance coverage."

Armstrong answers to a governor who says Idaho is not expanding Medicaid and whose office is fairly strict on message control. So what's going on here?

"In January, Otter told lawmakers he's a 'no' on Medicaid expansion," wrote Idaho Freedom Foundation President Wayne Hoffman - who a year ago led the fight against Otter's implementation of Obamacare's health insurance exchanges through the state. "Now, his top health care lieutenant is banging a different drum."

Want more proof?

Last week, two conservative eastern Idaho lawmakers introduced bills either severely curbing the obligation of counties to pay these medical bills - or eliminating that program entirely.

Rep. Janet Trujillo, R-Idaho Falls, would stop covering the health care bills of anyone falling under Obamacare's health insurance mandate. That would include the working poor, who get subsidized insurance under the exchanges.

Rep. Tom Loertscher, R-Iona, would repeal the county indigent and state CAT programs.

Both would take effect in 2016 - after Medicaid expansion ought to be up and running.

Wink wink.

Nod nod.

Monday, Senate President Pro Tem Brent Hill, R-Rexburg, and House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley, told reporters an interim panel of lawmakers will spend the rest of the year studying Medicaid expansion.

Another study? Otter's own task force studied this issue thoroughly more than a year ago and literally begged the governor to do something then.

But this latest panel will work out the details and have a bill ready to go by next January.

Now someone opposed to Obamacare might find that kind of maneuvering worthy of state school Superintendent Tom Luna.

Remember, Luna waged a successful 2010 re-election campaign on the premise that Idaho schools were doing just fine. The next year, he blindsided everyone with the Luna laws - undermining teacher employment rights, teacher compensation packages and replacing teachers with computers.

The taxpayer can't be too pleased, either. Idaho can't adequately support its schools, yet it has millions to waste delaying Medicaid expansion - simply to protect Republicans from primary election contests.

But that's only money. By some estimates, up to 600 Idahoans will die a premature death next year if the state waits to extend Medicaid coverage to them.

What's a few million bucks or a few hundred lives compared to protecting a few political hides, anyway? - M.T.