

Ottercare is not Otter's last word on the subject

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

In last week's oped, Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter made three points about his Primary Care Access Plan:

- Medicaid expansion, it is not. Accepting Obamacare's offer to extend coverage to 78,000 working poor Idaho adults who can't afford even subsidized private insurance would deliver something close to \$280 million of health care services. For the first three years of the program, the feds would pay 100 percent of the costs but never less than 90 percent thereafter.

PCAP - dubbed Ottercare critics on the right and left - would lend about \$30 million of coverage from state taxpayers. It would provide primary health care, but unlike Medicaid, precious little for prescriptions, follow-up laboratory work, procedures or hospitalization. Either people won't get the care they need or someone else will pay for it.

But Obamacare is anathema to many Idaho Republican lawmakers.

"The fact is that the PCAP option - or something very much like it - is all that we can reasonably hope to achieve right now in the context of Idaho's political environment," Otter wrote.

- This is the bare minimum. Otter and his Health and Welfare director, Richard Armstrong, have tied themselves into knots trying to persuade lawmakers to support Medicaid expansion. Task forces have documented time and again how paying for emergency care provided to the medically indigent is more expensive to county and state taxpayers. By one estimate, Medicaid expansion would save the state about \$173 million during the next 10 years.

Armstrong has outlined any number of hybrids - such as using Medicaid dollars to purchase private insurance where possible - meant to persuade lawmakers to accept the idea.

It hasn't worked. Neither has compassion. Last year, the state documented its first known case of an Idahoan dying for lack of health care insurance. Had she been covered by Medicaid, Jenny

Steinke of Idaho Falls would have been treated for asthma. Instead, she succumbed in an Idaho Falls hospital.

For every Jenny Steinke we know about, there may be as many as 800 unseen Idahoans whose lack of health care coverage will lead to their premature deaths this year.

"The need is undeniable," Otter said. "Haven't we gone long enough without addressing the issue?"

- Otter could have a few political cards up his sleeve. Consider this line:
" ... I will stick to the commitment I made to legislative leadership in June 2010 not to act unilaterally on any Obamacare-related issue," the governor wrote.

If the governor refuses to act unilaterally, then why mention it?

Of the 31 states that have expanded Medicaid coverage, at least five have relied on a governor's executive order.

Kentucky's Democratic Gov. Steve Beshear implemented Medicaid expansion on his own although Beshear's Republican successor, Matt Bevin, has pledged to reverse that.

In Louisiana, newly elected Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards plans to use executive action to implement the Medicaid program his Republican predecessor, Bobby Jindal, blocked.

Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey and Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad - both Republicans - are expanding portions of their Medicaid programs without legislative action.

Bill Walker, elected as an independent to be Alaska's governor, reacted to legislative indifference last year by announcing he would expand Medicaid through executive order. So far, his state's Supreme Court has recognized Walker's authority to act.

Idaho's GOP has become accustomed to rolling over Otter. But if it does so with PCAP, the governor could follow suit with an executive order simply expanding Medicaid coverage.

He'll need authority to spend the pass-through federal Medicaid dollars. But Otter would have far more leverage over a budget line item than a new health care program.

Lawmakers can turn thumbs down on Ottercare and go home.

They cannot leave Boise without passing an appropriations measure - and Otter has the power of a veto over any budget he does not like.

Such a standoff is going to be much tougher on a group of lawmakers eager to get out of Boise and hit the campaign trail than it is on a governor who will never face the voters again.

Those who have followed Otter's career don't think he has the nerve to try this.

For the sake of people like

Jenny Steinke, let's hope they're

wrong. - M.T.