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Opponents of US healthcare reform wield fear weapon

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* Fear motivates people more than facts

* Study shows people will seek facts to support beliefs

* Positive emotional appeals can counter the effect

By Maggie Fox, Health and Science Editor

WASHINGTON, Aug 28 (Reuters) - Opponents of U.S. healthcare reform have been wielding one of the most effective political weapons: fear.

People who are frightened will cling to false beliefs even if they are proven repeatedly to be untrue, and effective politicians and lobbyists know this, says sociologist Andrew Perrin of the University of North Carolina.

The administration of President Barack Obama will have to struggle to counter this powerful effect and may also have to make emotional appeals to do so, Perrin said.

"If I were advising them, I would probably tell them to be much more frank about the moral and emotional dimensions of this, not to talk about the dollars and cents of it," Perrin said in a telephone interview.

Fact-filled and logical arguments about how little the United States currently gets for its healthcare dollar will do little to counter rumors of "death panels" and socialized medicine, Perrin said.

"It's not that they don't want to know the facts. It's that people reason selectively," Perrin said.

Perrin and a team of colleagues were examining why so many Americans persisted in believing that former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was behind the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001, even though this had been repeatedly shown to be untrue.

"People were basically making up justifications for the fact that we were at war," said Steven Hoffman of the University at Buffalo in New York, who worked on the study.

Their experiments, published this week in the journal *Sociological Inquiry*, support the idea that people come up with theories first and then look for facts to support them.

'BIG PROBLEM'

Perrin said in the experiment, volunteers who supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq were given the evidence that Iraq was not responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks.

"By and large they accepted this evidence. They did not contest that the evidence was false," he said.

"They basically came up with new arguments for supporting the war since their original arguments were no longer valid."

Perrin, who studies democracy and American political behavior, said many people trying to influence legislation have become adept at making use of this basic human behavior.

"It is a big problem with the way American politics has been practiced lately," he said.

In the healthcare reform debate, advocates of change have been trying to use rational arguments about saving money and improving treatment.

"You can't just fight with the facts and hope that they work," Perrin said. "They don't want the facts to get in the way of the theory."

He praised Obama's approach of acknowledging fears about "pulling the plug on Granny." Some opponents of proposed legislation have claimed, incorrectly, that it calls for "death panels" that will decide whether to give care to senior citizens.

"A good tactic is to say 'these guys are scaring you -- don't let them,'" Perrin said. "People's emotions can change 180 degrees given the right conditions."

Positive messages can do this, he advised.

"It is much better for him to try and put people into a secure state and say 'we as a society have the capacity to provide decent healthcare for everyone,'" he said.

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