By Charlie Litton

Nebraska News Service

A four-person panel attempted to unravel the Gordian knot that is Medicare and Medicaid during a discussion held Thursday, Oct. 20 over the statewide Telehealth Network.

The general consensus of the panel appeared to be that neither the politicians who advocate policy changes nor the reporters who cover related issues seem to fully understand the complexity of it all. As a result, the general public is generally uninformed and misguided on the subject.

Panelist Bonnie Burns, training and policy specialist at California Health Advocates, illustrated this when she noted during the 75-minute discussion that she saw many senior citizens wearing buttons that read "Keep the government out of my Medicare" during the recent health care reform debate. As Burns noted, it's far too late to keep the government out of Medicare because it is a government creation.

The disconnect between reality and belief is perhaps best illustrated by the debate that surrounded so-called "death panels."

The idea behind the term was that government-sponsored health care would lead to health care decisions made by bureaucrats that would essentially determine who lived and who died.

The panelists rejected the idea of death panels as even a remote possibility, but none more vehemently than Ted Marmor, a professor emeritus at Yale University.

"Death panel is a term created to evoke an emotional response," he said. "The question is, are death panels created in this reform? The answer is no."

Marmor blamed such misinformation on politicians pushing an agenda, which is compounded by "lazy" reporters who don't challenge such assertions.

"Reporting what is said is not illuminating to the issue," he said with frustration.

Kearney Hub editor Mike Konz said the death panel coverage boiled down to its simplicity. That debate was in terms that people could readily understand, but the complexity of health care issues is something all reporters struggle with, he said.

"It's a deep subject and I don't feel ashamed to say that I'm a bit intimidated by it," he said. Konz, who also serves as vice president of the Nebraska Press Association, said that in his preparations for the panel discussion he called around the state looking for a reporter who specialized in Medicare/Medicaid coverage but could find none. Covering Medicare and Medicaid issues, he said, was more like a "horse race" where events develop incrementally. Such things don't lend themselves to regular coverage because they don't fall into a neat category of news which he defined as what's "new or unusual."

The lack of information provided to reporters by those in the know, such as health care policy experts or hospital associations, doesn't help local news outlets provide additional coverage, he said. It was the lone solution offered to help community media outlets better cover complex health care issues.

"I think that's the problem in newsrooms," he said. "The knowledge base is an inch thick and a mile wide."

The panel also discussed recent policy debates about increasing the age of eligibility for Medicare from 65 to 67. None of the panelists was positive about the idea, least of all Marmor of Yale.

He lampooned the notion, saying it was "foolish" and deserved "ridicule, not serious debate."

"It's a terrible idea. There's nothing good to be said about it at all," he said. "It's a genuinely bad idea."

The panel discussion was the third of a five-part series about health care being held on Nebraska's statewide Telehealth Network, which is available at 80 hospitals and 19 public health department offices. The series is a joint venture organized by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Journalism and Mass Communications, the Nebraska Hospital Association and the Nebraska Press Association.

Trudy Lieberman, a nationally recognized journalist who moderated the discussion, opened the session with the goal of bringing greater awareness and understanding between the public and health care professionals.

"There are very few issues that are surrounded by so much misinformation, disinformation and a lack of information," she said.

The series of discussions will also be aired next month on NET although exact times and ates have not yet been released.

The next session on Nov. 3 will cover death and dying, followed by the final panel on Dec. 1 about maintaining health.