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HEALTH UPDATE

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## Repealing and replacing Affordable Care Act no simple act

By CATHERINE LACKNER

Among the new presidential administration's signature campaign promises was the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, and its replacement.

But "the repeal and replace movement has stalled," said Keith Arnold, a senior principal and lobbyist in the Fort Myers office of the Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney law firm. "There is no easy resolution of this complicated issue. Though repeal has been the rallying cry of the far right since the act was passed in 2010, the fix has been elusive."

Members of Congress who recently returned to their districts during recess were met by angry crowds at town hall meetings "which erupted in ways that were unexpected," he said. "There are more than 20 million people

who now have healthcare insurance – some for the first time in their lives – and they want to keep it. All that emotion is difficult to address. It's the same old adage: be careful what you wish for."

Many consumers could only afford the insurance premiums because of government subsidies, which are in danger of being eliminated, Mr. Arnold said. "It's part of the conversation, and people are worried.

"Washington is in a tough place right now," he said. "It appears, despite the tall talk, that repealing and replacing Obamacare is a difficult, if not Herculean, task."

The Affordable Care Act is a 1,200-page bill, but all most consumers are concerned about is the insurance component, said Linda Quick, former president of the South Florida Hospital & Healthcare Association and now

president of Quick-Bernstein Connection Group, a consulting firm.

Though many Republican members of Congress say they can change the act to keep provisions that consumers like – including no exclusion for pre-existing conditions, and the ability for students to remain on their parents' policies – "that would be a trick," she said.

"If they eliminate the ACA, millions of people are going to lose insurance," which will have implications for all parts of the healthcare system, she said. Hospitals agreed to \$155 billion in cuts to Medicare reimbursements in anticipation of a flood of healthy, young insured people and a corresponding decrease in emergency room visits by the uninsured. "They conceivably could be in worse shape than they were before the act was passed," Ms. Quick said.

Safety-net institutions would be hit hardest, she added. "Those that serve poor people are the most vulnerable, and would need extra money from the government," she said, but it's not known if they would receive it.

When asked to speculate on a time frame for the repeal and possible replacement, she said, "I'd like to say they could resolve it before Congress leaves for Christmas break, but it's not hard to think it could be a longer chunk of time."

The magnitude of the challenge appears to have reached the Oval Office. According to a CNN report, President Donald Trump told at a meeting of governors at the White House on Monday that his administration had come up with a plan, but said, "It's an unbelievably complex subject. Nobody knew health care could be so complicated."