

Fixing Medicare
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July 7, 2008
559 words

The political games being played in Washington threaten the quality of health care provided to Kansas's Medicare patients and hamper the ability of physicians to serve the state's seniors.

Today, physicians and patients participating in the Medicare program face uncertainty about the future of Medicare. As Kansas experiences a shortage in health care professionals, the largest group of health care consumers – the elderly population – continues to expand. Add to this combination an automatic annual cut, triggered by federal law, in payments to physicians who serve Medicare beneficiaries, and you have a full-blown crisis in the health care system.

Every year, Congress votes on whether to delay impending federal reimbursement cuts to physicians who serve Medicare patients, and every year since 2003 that I've had the chance, I have voted to delay these cuts. Kansas seniors should have access to the highest quality health care professionals and services, and health care professionals should be encouraged, rather than discouraged, to serve our Medicare beneficiaries.

Last month, the prospect of delaying physician payment cuts in the Medicare program looked promising. A bipartisan bill was drafted and would have delayed the payment cuts for a year and a half. Had the Senate passed this bipartisan bill, it would have been quickly signed into law and would have gone into effect prior to the scheduled July 1st cuts.

It was disappointing, to say the least, that acting against the best interest of the country, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and the American Medical Association brokered a deal which took this proposed bipartisan bill off the Senate floor. Rather than voting on a bill which was all but guaranteed to pass into law, Majority Leader Reid instead called a vote on a controversial bill, H.R. 6331, the night before Congress adjourned for the 4th of July recess.

H.R. 6331 was considered controversial because a number of employer organizations have expressed concern that the legislation will cut payments to Medicare plans that offer coverage to their retired workers. In response to this concern, the Bush Administration issued a veto threat on H.R. 6331, thus requiring a vote of two-thirds of both the House of Representatives and the Senate to override the veto before the July 1st payment cuts went into effect.

The inevitable result of allowing a vote on only this controversial bill, the night before Congress left town, was that whether H.R. 6331 passed or failed, Congress would not even be in session to complete the override vote. This assumes, too, that two-thirds of Congress would vote to override the President's veto.

Why would the American Medical Association and Democrat leadership create such a difficult situation for our physicians and seniors? When asked this exact question the night of the vote on H.R. 6331, Majority Leader Reid cited the negative impact this vote would have on Congressional Republicans' re-election campaigns.

Kansans deserve better than to be used as political pawns during this upcoming election season. Those affected by these political maneuvers are our local physicians, our neighbors, our parents and our grandparents.

As your senator, I will continue to work in a bipartisan manner to ensure continued quality health for Kansas Medicare beneficiaries and adequate reimbursements for our Medicare providers. I will vote to delay any cuts to Medicare as long as the Democrats in the Senate stop playing games with our seniors' health care.