

Medicare cuts may reduce access to care (The News Journal)

100,000 in Del. would find fewer doctors willing to treat them

By NICOLE GAUDIANO

News Journal Washington bureau

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WASHINGTON -- More than 100,000 Medicare patients in Delaware could have a tougher time finding a doctor if Congress and the president don't act soon to prevent scheduled cuts in payments to physicians.

An American Medical Association survey of nearly 9,000 physicians found that 60 percent would limit the number of new Medicare patients they treat if a 10.6 percent cut in their reimbursements takes effect this year.

The pay cut, a result of a cost-control formula established by Congress in 1997, was scheduled for July 1. But the Bush administration gave the Senate 10 extra business days to reconsider legislation that would prevent the cuts and increase doctors' payments by 1.1 percent next year.

The Senate is expected to decide as early as today whether to proceed on the bill.

"If physicians drop out of Medicare or limit their number of patients they see in their practice, then that becomes an access problem," said Kelly Eschbach, a Wilmington physician and president of the Medical Society of Delaware. "It's the seniors and disabled, those who need these services the most, who aren't going to have access."

The measure passed the House on June 24 by an overwhelming margin of 355-59, with Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., voting in favor. But the bill got held up when it moved to the Senate two days later.

At issue is how to pay for it. The Bush administration and some Republicans are against federal funding cuts to the privately operated Medicare Advantage programs, an alternative to the traditional fee-for-services program.

Bush has threatened to veto the bill, which would cut Medicare Advantage funding to pay for the physician fees.

Democratic Sens. Joe Biden and Tom Carper of Delaware expressed disappointment and surprise over the Republicans' blocking action on the bill, saying its failure would hurt seniors.

"GOP tactics at the urging of the White House ended up protecting insurance companies over doctors and patients, which is unfortunate," they wrote in a joint statement.

But Karen Ignagni, president and CEO of America's Health Insurance Plans, said Medicare Advantage cuts "could mean limited choices, reduced benefits and higher out-of-pocket costs for seniors."

Most of the 44 million elderly and disabled Medicare patients have their services paid for through the traditional program, while about 20 percent, or 8.7 million, receive benefits through Medicare Advantage, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

In Delaware, the total number of Medicare beneficiaries this year is 137,191, or 16 percent of the state's population, according to the Foundation's statehealthfacts.org. Medicare Advantage enrollment in Delaware for 2007 was 3,140.

Senate Democrats will take up the bill again this week, hoping voters will have swayed their lawmakers over the Fourth of July recess. AHIP and the American Medical Association launched competing advertising campaigns over the break.

In Delaware, 40 percent of practicing physicians are over 50, an age when they consider reducing their patient loads, according to the AMA.

Even in the years doctors get a 0.5 percent or 1 percent pay increase, they are still in essence taking a pay cut because the costs of running a practice are increasing at a much higher rate, Eschbach said.

Doctors hope the fee formula can eventually be changed to account for inflation.

"We're feeling the squeeze," she said.

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