

## Senate passes bill to block Medicare cuts (The News Journal)

Payments to doctors would have been slashed 10.6 percent

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WASHINGTON -- The Senate passed a measure Wednesday to block an impending 10.6 percent cut in payments to doctors treating Medicare patients, including more than 137,000 living in Delaware.

The voice vote came just after a motion to advance the bill succeeded because some Republicans who had earlier opposed the bill changed their positions. A similar motion last month failed by a single vote.

President Bush has promised to veto the bill because of its cost, but the Senate's 69-30 vote to advance the bill is veto-proof.

The bill's passage is "a positive sign that Congress recognizes our nation's physicians can no longer absorb fee cuts year after year and still maintain viable practices and meet the needs of our growing elderly population," said Kelly S. Eschbach, a Wilmington physician and Medical Society of Delaware president.

The Medicare cuts were supposed to take effect July 1 as part of a Medicare cost containment program. The Bush administration, hoping lawmakers could reach a compromise, delayed the reductions until July 15.

Some Republicans had opposed the bill because it would eliminate the cuts in physician payments by instead taking money from private insurance plans known as Medicare Advantage, which cover about 20 percent of seniors nationally.

Medicare Advantage enrollment in Delaware for 2007 was 3,140.

If Medicare cut payments to physicians, then fees also would be reduced to doctors treating veterans, military retirees and their dependents under the Tricare program. The Pentagon's health care system relies on the Medicare fee schedule to pay doctors.

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 took effect this year.

The legislation, crafted mainly by Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., who chairs the Senate Finance Committee, won overwhelming support in the House with Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., voting in favor.

"Both the House and Senate have now passed this bill with veto-proof majorities," wrote Democratic Sens. Joe Biden and Tom Carper of Delaware in a joint statement. "The president should sign this important bill into law."

Dr. Nicholas Biasotto, a primary care doctor in Stanton, said before the vote that he doubted he would stop caring for the Medicare patients he already sees. But he would be more likely to refuse new ones if the Medicare cuts take place.

Medicare patients take the most work since they are more likely than younger patients to have chronic illnesses and be on multiple medications.

"If this trend continues, within 10 years you're going to be hard pressed to find a family doctor," he said.

He said he already works 60 to 70 hours a week.

"I don't know how much more time I can give," he said.

The cuts also would have hurt Cardiology Consultants since half its patients are on Medicare, said Dr. Andrew Doorey, a cardiologist and partner with the company. The company is already dealing with rising costs for overhead expenses.

"Doctors are caught between a rock and a hard place," he said.

But Doorey said it would be unethical for specialists to increase the rates of other procedures to recoup the losses from Medicare cuts.

"You just can't invent things to do to try to restore your income," he said. "There's really no legal realm to bill more and do more. Most of us think that's bogus and not right. We try to focus on what we know and what we do well."

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