

**Interviews With Lawmakers
Representative Sherrod Brown (D – Ohio)
and Rebecca Adams
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REBECCA ADAMS: We are here with Congressman Sherrod Brown, a Democrat from Ohio. He serves on the Energy and Commerce Committee. We'd like to talk to him about the healthcare priorities of the 108th Congress. Congressman, I'm wondering what you're hearing about concerns from doctors about the 4.4% cut that physicians will be facing in March. What do you think will be happening with that and with the other concerns of other providers who also want additional, so called givebacks?

REPRESENTATIVE SHERROD BROWN: Providers, physicians and hospitals alike, and other providers, PTs, OTs, Speech and Hearing Therapists, Chiropractors, all providers are concerned about these cuts and concerned about the Bush administrations pulling the rug out from under public programs that we have not fully or adequately funded. The \$1.6 trillion tax cut of last year, the proposed tax cut of this year combine to make it very difficult for Congress to do any kinds of payments to physicians, any kinds of adequate payments to hospitals, not to mention new programs, such as the prescription drug benefit or anything else, whether it's education, whether it's home heating, the 400,000 people who are cut off of HEAP, the Home Heating Assistance Program, in other words, to starve, in order to give this tax cut to the richest people in the country, we're starving public health programs and health programs generally like Medicare and Medicaid that generally serve

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underserved populations.

REBECCA ADAMS: What about Medicaid, a number of the governors around the country are concerned about cuts that they are facing or that they may have to make on the state level because of the fiscal crisis in a number of these different states. What do you see happening with respect to having some sort of aid or help for the various states that are facing very tight budgets this year?

REPRESENTATIVE SHERROD BROWN: The President reluctantly supported unemployment compensation, extending a program that is an insurance program, not a welfare program, the workers who deserve it and can't find jobs, reluctantly, finally came around to supporting that. He has not supported it and is from time to time never really spoken about the F-Med program that Peter King and I have introduced legislation to temporarily increase the federal share of Medicaid spending. Snow, Rockefeller, and Hutchinson in the Senate, have introduced a similar bill. A temporary increase to help states with Medicaid, with funding Medicaid, I mean the President's answer instead is to block grant Medicaid which will ultimately mean that it will place enrollment caps in the program and rather than helping states keep their Medicaid program intact during this economic downturn, the time they need it the most, the President would rather do tax cuts and would make use of, basically take advantage of the problems, the problems of

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funding, would take advantage of funding problems to end the entitlement and to do that, you have a weaker Medicaid program where beneficiaries who are indigent cannot afford to, are forced to pick up costs they have to go without, while that will solve some budget problems, there will be, it will increase the number of uninsured, and will ultimately increase the cost of the whole system because costs gets shifted into emergency rooms and all that happens that way.

REBECCA ADAMS: So, bottom line, what do you expect to happen with Medicaid this year?

REPRESENTATIVE SHERROD BROWN: Oh I would say expect there to be a big fight on block granting Medicaid. You know when there's block granting of Medicaid, and if there is a big block grant of money that goes to the states, in Columbus, in Harrisburg, in Albany, in Sacramento, in Lansing, in Indianapolis and everywhere else in the country, the nursing fight with poor children and the nursing homes are probably more likely to win and so, as a resolve, you end up with overall funding, less, without the entitlement status of Medicaid and you end up with poor children, and the global budget less, and with poor children getting even less of a smaller budget. And then we end up with more uninsured, so that fight is going to be mammoth in Congress and I'm hoping that a few Republicans who are moderate and will understand the predicament, the fiscal predicament of the states, and will

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understand that anything we do like this is going to increase the number of kids who don't have insurance.

REBECCA ADAMS: On the subject of the uninsured, what about state grant proposals to either provide tax credits or expand federal health programs. What do you think will happen in Congress this year given the divides on these particular issues?

REPRESENTATIVE SHERROD BROWN: I think when, I think first when helping the uninsured, you do no harm and that means preserving Medicaid and Republicans, Senator Frisk, Sherman Thomas will push for tax credits, will push for association plans and their healthcare policies are based on healthcare ideology, rather than policy logic. All kinds of healthcare experts of both parties outside of Congress say simply that giving tax breaks, to giving tax incentives for the uninsured doesn't provide the real bang for the buck. I mean it's just not, it carves up large insurance risk pools, it drives costs up in the standard insurance market. This kind of market-based sort of tax policy doesn't work and never has worked with reducing the number of uninsured, but it's the ideological pursuit that the President and the Republican leadership seem to want to follow.

REBECCA ADAMS: On another issue that has garnered a lot of attention this year, what do you see happening with respect to partial birth abortion or issues such as cloning or skin

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cell research. What do you envision for all of those various topics?

REPRESENTATIVE SHERROD BROWN: I like to answer as obviously three different questions. I think on, what Bill Frisk said on TV the other day, on Meet the Press, they asked him, what are your major problems, they said, it seems the major problems are in healthcare, the uninsured, a prescription drug benefit, he said, are those at the top of your list, and for all intents and purposes is, the number one priority for Republicans, the first thing we are going to do is the partial birth abortion ban affecting a few hundred vs. something much more important which affects tens of millions and I just said, I just said something to mean about this ideological agenda that they pursue that's not based in reality. It's not based in people's lives, the Republican leadership, out of which the Republican leadership are so out-of-touch. That wasn't quite said right, but I mean it's pretty clear that that's not a priority for any, but the most ideological driven people in the country. The ban on partial birth compared to prescription drug coverage, compared to universal coverage, compared to even the malpractice issue and what we should do there. So, I suppose the Republicans will probably push that through. It will probably go through both houses, it will go to court, it may be struck down because they won't protect the health of the woman and do any provision there, I don't know. Cloning, therapeutic

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cloning, we all pretty much believe, I mean I think almost everyone in Congress believes there should a reproductive cloning ban, a therapeutic cloning ban is a whole other issue, while it probably would pass the house, I believe that last year, if I remember, that some, apparently Senators Hatch, and Specter, a couple of Republicans do support therapeutic cloning. I mean it's insane to me to prohibit therapeutic cloning when medical science across the board, regardless of scientist's ideology, political ideology, scientists understand that therapeutic cloning, in fact, will save countless lives in the future and a far-right ideological, far-right religious right-wing ideological agenda shouldn't drive science the way that the Bush White House wants to, whether it's to what they do in their Web CD Websites, or NIH Websites, sort of undercover that the press rarely writes about, or whether it's something out in the open like therapeutic cloning.

REBECCA ADAMS: Since last year, the house passed a Bill by Dave Weldon.

REPRESENTATIVE SHERROD BROWN: That's who, I'm sorry.

REBECCA ADAMS: The Dave Weldon ban, which goes further than the therapeutic ban. Do you anticipate that we will see a similar outcome this year?

REPRESENTATIVE SHERROD BROWN: Yeah, I suppose, yeah probably, in the House, but the Senate, I think is different.

REBECCA ADAMS: You mentioned briefly about the issue of

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Medical malpractice. A lot of physicians are obviously concerned about this. Where do you anticipate that to be going?

REPRESENTATIVE SHERROD BROWN: Well I think Republicans will sort of force a Bill again, to rush a Bill through the House to make insurance companies happy and to make doctors happy, and it won't solve the problem. I think if the Republican leadership were responsible, if we were in the majority, if I was running the health committee, I would subpoena insurance companies to come in and tell us what's driving the premium increases. Nobody really knows what's driving them, except insurance companies. Are they paying out higher claims or not? Are they recouping investment losses or not, or is that just the underwriting cycle, I mean what's the story here. In every state where this has been pushed, the insurance companies have never really honed up to the issue. Trial lawyers, it may be trial lawyers, it may be insurance companies, we don't know. But, to just say automatically, it's trial lawyers and that's going to make premiums go down is unlikely. We had a committee issue, you may recall, those of you who followed it, that we had an amendment that said, the caps on premiums, the money saved had to go to a new capsule and damages had to go to an increase in premiums and the Republicans voted it down. This Bill isn't to help doctors, this Bill is to help insurance companies and if the Republicans cared, really cared about this issue, they would bring the

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insurance companies in. Subpoena them; find out what in fact is causing the problem. But they would rather collect the insurance company political action committee monies and appear to be heroes to the doctors, but in the end, the problem isn't solved.

REBECCA ADAMS: On the issue of insurers, on a slightly different topic, do you believe that insurance companies could provide a Medicare prescription drug benefit in a way that would benefit seniors and what do you anticipate seeing from the Republicans this year with respect to a Medicare prescription drug plan?

REPRESENTATIVE SHERROD BROWN: Understand first, that a prescription drug plan, the Republicans will not take one step without the permission of the drug companies and the drug companies gave soft money, hard money, independent expenditures, \$90 million to the Republicans this year. President Bush spoke at and allotted the chief fund-raiser among the drug companies, one of the CEO's of a big drug companies for their political work and support of the Republicans. I mean they are not, the President and Republican leadership; their first biggest contributors are the drug companies. Bill Frist took care of Ely Lilly, you know, first do no harm, well I guess he's a Senator, not a doctor, in that case and the question is, to start with the fact that the drug companies will go, the Congress will go nowhere the drug

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companies don't want them to go. That being said, we will do nothing about price. We could do a host of things about price; we could harness the buying power of 40 million Medicare beneficiaries. We could do something as simple as that. We could do something a little more complex on dealing with re-importation in a way that would absolutely guarantee safety, as much as we can guarantee it now, and go into the world market to get cheaper drugs, or we could do something as complex and controversial as compulsory life insurance. We have a whole host of things we could do, but the Republicans, being the lap dogs of the drug companies, will do none of that. Start with that and the Republicans warn, they don't have enough money to do a good drug benefit because the Republicans have chosen tax cuts for Bush contributors and the wealthy over a real drug benefit, an adequately funded one, that's the second strait-jacket we're in and third, the Republicans want to do a drug benefit according to their ideology, and their ideology is to do something that has never really worked when it's been tried. And that is to have private insurance companies offer drug benefits and there is no reason a private insurance company, the only reason a private insurance company would offer a drug benefit, is if we shovel so much money into the HMO that's doing that, that they then will, but practice says that it would take a huge amount of money then if it were applied to traditional fee-for-service Medicare. It would produce a much

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better benefit than if and this sort of insurance company privatized HMO delivery system the Republicans want.

REBECCA ADAMS: What about the cost though, of delivering a benefit through the traditional fee-for-service Medicare program and providing a benefit that seniors will see as generous. Your proposal, if memory serves me correctly, was \$900 billion, or the Democratic proposal was. Do you think that that is a reasonable or realistic thing that could actually get through Congress?

REPRESENTATIVE SHERROD BROWN: No, of course it's not because the Republicans will do nothing that the drug companies won't let them do and the drug companies don't want a benefit, the drug companies don't want a benefit where we actually do something about price, and they... one of the things that I excluded earlier on this sort of launch list about what do we do about price, is the Bill that became synonymous with Schumer in the Senate and Brown and Emerson in the House to stop them from getting the patent system. That would save \$100 billion, at least over 10-years. The price of a decent (Unintelligible). The Republicans made a choice, they have a \$300 billion drug benefit and do nothing about the cost of drugs, but they made a choice, they give tax cuts to their rich friends. The Democrats have a \$900 billion drug benefit and don't want to do that tax cut that goes overwhelming to the rich. That's not the way the President explains it, but the fact is the tax cut means we

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can't do a good drug benefit. The \$300 billion drug benefit for most people will be non-existent and government can't afford under Republican plans. Neither the government nor individuals, nor businesses can afford to do drug coverage, any kind of adequate drug coverage because the Republican leadership is so close to the drug industry.

REBECCA ADAMS: Do you think a Medicare Prescription Drug Bill will be made into law this year?

REPRESENTATIVE SHERROD BROWN: I have no idea. I think we won't see one that matters to very many people's lives, because if the Republicans get one through, it will be so scaled down and so limited that whatever iteration it takes, that few people will benefit. So to do the right kind of benefit is sort of ideologically off limits to the Republicans. You can't do a good drug benefit without nicking more of the drug companies, because if you do an adequate benefit, you've got to have some control on costs, on the price and the Republicans won't, drug companies call, look at the drug companies influence yesterday with the Food and Drug Administration, the drug companies allowed to do direct and consumer adverting. It clearly fuels use and all that. The FDA, which has become an arm of the drug companies, well actually it's become an arm of the White House, which is an arm of the drug industry on healthcare issues. The FDA came to our committee not a year ago and the first thing they told us that

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they were proudest of is that the US drug companies world market share has increased dramatically in the last two or three years. I thought the FDA was there to protect the public and to make sure the public knows that the drugs are safe and the efficacy of drugs and all that. I guess the new Bush FDA is there to increase market share for the donors to the Bush Administration.

REBECCA ADAMS: On that note, Congressman, we'll end the interview and I appreciate your help and thanks so much for your time.

REPRESENTATIVE SHERROD BROWN: Okay, I appreciate that.