

CQ Transcript
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PROMO

MEDICAID: The House of Representatives sets up a possible veto showdown with the president by sending their Medicaid bill to the floor

FDA: Food and Drug inspectors are going to China, and lawmakers want to boost agency funding.

HOSPITAL INFECTIONS: A new report says the government isn't doing enough to cut down on deadly hospital infections.

INTRO: A bipartisan bill in the House that would halt several Bush administration Medicaid directions has been cleared for floor action, setting up a possible showdown between Capitol Hill and the White House—with lawmakers holding the higher ground. Meanwhile, Senate appropriators have plans to give more money to the Food and Drug Administration, and many on the Hill believe the FDA's plans to keep Americans safe from imported drugs and food aren't enough. Finally, a new report says government health agencies aren't doing enough to stop hospital infections that kill nearly 100,000 Americans each year.

MEDICAID:

Question 1: This Medicaid bill is headed to the floor, and Republicans have joined Democrats to support it. What's going on here?

The legislation is designed to block seven different regulatory policies written by the Bush administration, all of which would cut back on Medicaid dollars going to states. The administration says some states are unfairly gaming the system to wring money out of the federal government, but lawmakers want to keep the dollars flowing back home to the hospitals, healthcare workers and patients in their districts. The bill, written by House Energy and Commerce Chairman John D. Dingell of Michigan, would block the Bush administration rules from taking effect for a year.

Question 2: Will the president just veto the bill? Democrats haven't had much success overriding his veto pen before.

Yes, he almost certainly will veto the bill. The administration said as much in a letter they sent to lawmakers on Tuesday, outlining all the reasons they oppose it. But this is a district issue. The top committee Republican, Joe Barton from Texas, said on Wednesday that there wouldn't be enough votes to uphold an veto—Republicans want those dollars for their constituents just as much as Democrats do.

Question 3: So what's happening next with the bill?

Well, the House still has to pass it. Since the next Medicaid cuts go into effect just before Memorial Day, lawmakers don't have much time. Expect to see it on the House floor soon. Then the bill heads to the Senate, which is the wild card. It'll almost certainly pass there, but supporters of the bill aren't sure what will happen after the president vetoes the bill. It could be the last stand for opponents of the bill—and nobody knows yet if the Senate would have enough votes to override a presidential veto.

FDA

Question 4: Lawmakers have been talking a lot about the FDA lately. What's going on there?

One of the former FDA commissioners, Mark McClellan, said a few weeks ago about the FDA, "You know whatever you do, every day, you're going to make somebody mad." Congress has been after the agency for a long time—it's one of those Capitol Hill constants like navy blazers and bland cafeteria food. But there is a lot of heat coming down on the agency right now. Much of it comes from real worries about foods and

drugs coming in from China and India. Those countries don't have great regulatory systems, but we import a ton of goods from them. At the same time, the FDA doesn't have any inspectors over in those countries, so we're almost totally dependent on them to get it right—which they haven't always done.

Question 5: So what's Congress going to do?

Probably give the agency more money, at a minimum. There really aren't the funds at the FDA to pay for a full-scale foreign inspection force. Senate appropriators held a hearing this week with FDA Commissioner Andrew von Eschenbach, and asked him what he needed. The agency wants about \$54 million in new funds, but lawmakers want to give them a lot more. One recent report said the agency needed \$375 million more a year just to do its current job. Since it's almost certain that the Hill is going to boost the agency's funding, this was the first step in feeling out how big the cash infusion is going to be.

Question 6: At the hearing, FDA Commissioner von Eschenbach did say the agency is doing something about the import worries though, right?

Yes—the FDA is just starting to set up offices in five different regions, starting with three offices in China. The plan is to put permanent inspectors there so they can have an on-the-ground presence. They'll have about 13 staffers over there, once it's fully implemented. They're also planning to put in offices in India, South America, Europe and the Middle East.

Question 7: So does that take care of the problem?

Answer 7: Probably not, at least as lawmakers see it. Dingell just introduced a bill that would put some serious money toward foreign inspections for food and drugs and would also set up a formal foreign inspection core for the FDA to go over to those countries. Now, we're still in the draft phase of the bill and the lawmakers still have to mark it up. But, at this point it looks like it could be moving forward this year. Though it's unsure if it will make it into final law.

HOSPITAL INFECTIONS

Question 8: Tell us about these hospital infections—what are they and what's happening?

I'll walk you through the problem. Let's say you're in the hospital recovering from surgery, or you're there being treated for pneumonia or something. There are a lot of germs in hospitals—it's just what happens when you have a lot of sick people lying around. Occasionally, surgical wounds or IV lines or ventilator tubes become the starting point for an infection that can be even worse than whatever the patient was being treated for in the first place. A lot of these infections are from anti-biotic resistant bacteria. The one everyone knows about is methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus, or MRSA.

Now, you can prevent a lot of these infections by being really diligent about hygiene, or how you place IVs, and other safety tactics. But not all hospitals are great at this, so people get infected. Each year, it's estimated that 100,000 people die from these type of infections.

Question 9: The Government Accountability Office put out a report on this, what did it say?

That's right—the GAO report was the basis for a hearing held by the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee this week. It basically said that government health agencies weren't doing enough to help hospitals fight the infections. The report recommended that agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the agency that oversees Medicare and Medicaid, should develop clear guidelines for hospitals on how they can fight the infections. It also said that there needs to be better information collecting—we don't know a lot about these infections, yet, so policy makers need better information on how common they are, how they spread, what types of patients they hit, that type of thing.

Question 10: Is there going to be legislation here?

Well, the oversight hearing was probably an early step. A lot of this can be done by the health agencies, so it's unclear if lawmakers will go ahead with a bill unless they really see the need to change how the agencies are doing their jobs. You could see Medicare and Medicaid forcing hospitals to show that they're doing a better job fighting infections, as a condition for getting paid to treat patients.