

**CQ Transcript**  
**July 18, 2008**

**PROMO**

**MEDICARE:** Congress overrides veto of Medicare bill.

**HIV/AIDS:** Senate passes global HIV/AIDS legislation after the chamber considered a series of amendments.

**MEDICAL LEAVE:** House panel approves measure that would permit college students to retain health coverage during medical leave.

**INTRO**

The House and Senate easily overrode President Bush's veto of legislation to stop a scheduled 10.6 percent cut in Medicare physician payments. Meanwhile, the Senate approved a \$50 billion, five-year plan to fight HIV/AIDS and other diseases overseas, and a House panel approved a bill that would allow college students who take a medical leave of absence to remain on their parents' health insurance.

**MEDICARE**

Question 1: As expected, both the House and Senate overrode President Bush's promised veto of Medicare legislation that would prevent a cut in Medicare physician payments. Can you summarize the action for us?

Answer: The House voted first, overriding the veto by a vote of 383-41. The Senate followed by a vote of 70 to 26, so the bill now becomes law. As you mentioned, the measure would block a 10.6 percent cut in Medicare physician payments for the next 18 months and give physicians 1.1 percent increase in 2009. Physicians' groups had launched an intense lobbying campaign, as did advocacy groups such as AARP, to secure the bill's passage and the override of Bush's veto.

Question 2: What else would the bill do?

Answer: It would require some private fee-for-service plans in Medicare to form provider networks and it would eliminate payments to private insurers in the Medicare Advantage program for indirect medical education. It would also postpone for 18 months a competitive bidding program that was launched July 1 in 10 regions of the country for certain types of durable medical equipment. Funding for that delay came in lower Medicare payments for those equipment suppliers.

Question 3: What's ahead on this issue?

Answer: Of course physicians are delighted that they will not see their Medicare reimbursements cut, but the larger issue of a legislative solution that will prevent further cuts in the future is delayed. It may be part of a larger health care reform bill next year, since in 2010, physicians will face at least a 20 percent cut in their rates, and finding a solution for that will be even more expensive to finance 18 months from now.

## **HIV/AIDS**

Question 4: What's the latest on Senate action on legislation aimed at fighting AIDS and other global diseases?

Answer: The Senate passed the measure by a vote of 80-16. The chamber considered a series of amendments designed to change the bill and adopted one that trimmed the original \$50 billion authorization for the global health plan to \$48 billion and directed \$2 billion on American Indian issues. Other changes made during the amendments process would increase oversight of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and encourage cost sharing and transition strategies as part of agreements with recipient countries.

Question 5: What amendments were rejected?

Answer: The Senate defeated several amendments. One would have established a "sunset" commission to propose legislation, which would have been subject to expedited consideration, that would abolish any global AIDS programs that Congress did not explicitly reauthorize. Another amendments would have set up an inspector general for the programs and another of the defeated amendments would have limited spending in the program's final year to \$10 billion.

Question 6: What is different between House and Senate versions of the bill?

Answer: While both would authorize \$50 billion, the Senate measure would spend \$2 billion of that on Indian health care, law enforcement and clean water programs. The Senate bill also lacks some of the spending mandates in the House bill, though unlike the House measure it would require that more than half of bilateral aid go to AIDS treatment and care. But both measures would overturn an existing law requiring that one-third of prevention money be spent on abstinence education. Instead, they would require a report to Congress if abstinence and fidelity programs fall below half of prevention spending in a given country.

Question 7: What's next for this bill?

Answer: The House is expected to consider and clear the measure as soon as next week, which would send the bill to the White House. President Bush is expected to sign the legislation.

## **MEDICAL LEAVE**

Question 8: A House panel approved a measure dealing with college students and health insurance. Could you tell us about that?

Answer: The House Energy and Commerce Committee unanimously approved the legislation, which would allow college students to remain on their family's health insurance plan if they take a medical leave from school. The measure was amended to clarify that insurers must provide coverage to students who downgrade to part-time status as a result of a serious illness or injury. Whether the student is full time or part time, insurers must continue coverage for up to 12 months. Federal law currently requires that children covered by their families' health insurance policies are entitled to coverage under those policies until age 25 if they continue their education full time.

Question 9: Separately, the House Veterans Affairs Committee approved several bills dealing with veterans' health care. What were those?

Answer: One would allow veterans who live in certain rural areas that are far from VA health facilities to receive care for covered health services through outside providers. Another bill would prohibit the collection of co-payments from veterans for hospital and nursing home care if the veteran is considered to be catastrophically disabled. Other measures would require the VA to develop by Oct 1 a comprehensive pain management plan for veterans suffering from acute and chronic pain and authorize seven new regional VA health care billing centers.

Question 10: There are also some new developments on the National Institutes of Health and funding. What's new there?

Answer: Senators Tom Harkin, a Democrat of Iowa, and Arlen Specter, a Republican of Pennsylvania, said they planned to introduce legislation that would provide an additional \$5.2 billion in emergency fiscal 2008 funding for the agency. The bill would allocate \$1.2 billion for the National Cancer Institute and the remaining \$4 billion to the other NIH institutes. The funding would be in addition to the spending increases proposed for NIH in the fiscal 2009-spending bill now pending in the Senate.