
What Did Happen:

Question 1: Last May, Congress moved quickly to pass legislation that would spend billions to help the nation prepare for a possible bioterrorism attack. What would the bill do and why could lawmakers reach consensus on it so quickly?

Answer: The bill authorizes funds to increase the nation's stockpile of medicines and vaccines, to expand the facilities and labs run by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and it also provides grant to help state and local government and health facilities prepare and train for bioterrorist attacks. The bill also reauthorized drug company user fees to help the Food and Drug Administration review and approval of new drugs. The drug provision drew some criticism from critics who said it threatened to make the FDA a captive of the industry it regulated. But supporters, including Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, a Massachusetts Democrat, said the bill balanced speedy approval of life-saving drugs with new money and authority to do safety studies of drugs once they landed on pharmacy shelves. The bill passed in two days with widespread support because it was aimed in response to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on our nation. Even though critics say they money is nowhere near what is really needed to help our nation prepare, at least it's a start and funding could always be increased later.

Question 2: How important are the measures passed to help quicken the Food and Drug Administration approval of medical devices and to improve funding for community health centers? What impact will these measures have on public health?

Answer: Proponents of the bills hope they will make a significant contribution. The medical devices bill, for example, is supposed to help get new medical devices on the market more quickly. Device manufacturers pay so-called user fees to help the FDA hire new regulators to help process the device approval applications. The bill also includes money to expand FDA studies of the safety of new products after they reach the market. The Community Health Centers measure reauthorizes funding for those centers, as well as the National Health Service Corps and telehealth and rural health care programs. These programs are designed to provide medical care in under served rural and urban areas.

Question 3: Supporters of "mental health parity" had hoped that Congress would pass legislation to improve insurers' coverage of mental health illnesses. Instead, lawmakers simply extended a law that says if an insurer provides mental health benefits, they must have the same annual and lifetime limits as coverage for physical ailments. Why didn't Congress go further?

Answer: As you say, there had been high hopes that Congress would have done more, especially since that issue was so important to the late Sen. Paul Wellstone, a Minnesota Democrat who died in a plane crash just days before the November elections. But business and employer groups argue that such an expansion would simply push already soaring health insurance costs even higher, and lawmakers were reluctant to make such a broad -- and likely costly -- expansion in health care.