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MEDICARE FEE CUTS

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The last-minute Congressional action also increased general doctors' Medicare fees by an additional .5 percent, and extended a number of other higher reimbursement rates, such as those to rural health care providers. The postponement is only for six months, and thus the scheduled 10 percent cut will automatically go into effect on July 1st unless Congress acts again to postpone the otherwise mandated fee reduction. This action came after the House of Representatives had passed a two-year postponement which was vigorously opposed by the Bush Administration and which ultimately failed in the US Senate.

The "compromise" that resulted in the six-month postponement of Medicare fee cuts was worked out at the Senate level and co-introduced by Democratic Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus of Montana and ranking Republican Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa. In his formal comments on the initiative, Sen. Baucus stated: "This bill takes needed, immediate steps to shore up Medicare by restoring physician payments and ensuring seniors' continued access to health care in rural areas. But next year, Congress must move boldly to improve Medicare for seniors. In 2008, it will also be time to change Medicare in a smart and fiscally responsible way, serving both the seniors who use Medicare and the taxpayers who fund this vital program."

In a similar, conciliatory tone, Senator Grassley stated: "This bill includes essential policies for the government to make sure doctors can continue to treat Medicare beneficiaries and to preserve health care services in rural areas of the country. It's a six-month extension that serves as a stop-gap until Congress can take care of the important Medicare business that got backed up this fall."

House Democrats were not so conciliatory. In one of the strongest partisan

representations the ICA Legislative Committee has ever seen, Representative Pete Stark (D-CA), Chairman of the Ways and Means Health Subcommittee, said on the House Floor when this bill was considered on December 19th: "I wish I could say that I was pleased to be here today to support important legislation, but you can't say that about this bill the Republicans have brought us... This bill was designed by the Republicans to support their rich friends, the pharmaceutical industry, the for-profit insurance industry and to destroy Medicare as millions of American seniors have known it, to harm children, and to cast blame at illegal immigrants and working single parents. It shows the Republicans in their truest form, help the rich at the expense of the poor and deny government services to everyone and only help the profit industries who pay them so generously through their campaign contributions which will be useless because the public will realize that we don't need them anymore."

The earlier House bill paid for program enhancements by reducing overpayments to which Mr. Stark referred to as "the substandard private plans in Medicare," the so called Medicare "Advantage" plans. This class of plans was the subject of massive criticism earlier in 2007 because of the 19 percent additional cost per beneficiary of providing care through Medicare Advantage plans, compared to the standard Part B fee-for-service option, through which most Medicare beneficiaries are covered, as well as a host of marketing abuses by private insurance contractors.

Referring to the Medicare advantage plans, Mr. Stark also told his House colleagues: "Adding insult to injury, this legislation also lets HMOs and the insurance industry off virtually scot-free, even though MedPAC, CBO, GAO, the Office of Inspector General and even the Administration's own actuaries confirm that we overpay these second-rate for-profit plans relative to the rest of Medicare."

One thing leaders of both houses

MEDICARE CONFERENCE

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parties and the November general elections," said ICA Legislative Committee Co-Chair Dr. Michael S. McLean. "ICA believes that this is a most opportune time to hold a focused discussion on the host of issues critical to chiropractic and chiropractic patients in Medicare, and on the health of that massive program, in general. ICA hopes that this historic session will help craft a profession-wide awareness of the urgent need for Medicare reform, and of chiropractic's unique and positive role in helping the nation's seniors."

ICA has invited senior members of the Finance Committee of the US Senate and the US House Committee on Ways and Means, the congressional committees with jurisdiction over the Medicare program, as well as representatives of the key Presidential candidates to offer their respective predictions and reform concepts for Medicare, as well as answer specific questions on chiropractic's Medicare role. Also invited are representatives of the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) to present their insights on Medicare's future, and how we can

cooperate to strengthen patients' rights and choices, as well as the general viability of the program.

The program will include panels on "Chiropractic's Practice Challenges in Medicare," "Chiropractic's Political Challenges in Medicare," and an all-important panel discussion on coordinating a collective chiropractic response on Medicare challenges and opportunities. "ICA has also invited the legislative committees of every state and national chiropractic organization in the country to a special forum at which the mechanics of political action and communications coordination will be discussed, along with other cooperative initiatives that are vital to success on the Medicare, as well as other national political and legislative issues," said Dr. McLean.

"ICA hopes that this unique conference will assist in bringing the entire chiropractic profession together in a focused discussion that will result in a consensus on what needs to be done and how the important work on Medicare is to be accomplished," said ICA President Dr. John K. Maltby. "Everyone in the profession is not only welcome at this conference, they are needed and wanted, because we understand that it will take all of us, working in an historic

agree on is that early in 2008, the entire Medicare program will be up for serious review and reform, including a revamping of how doctors fees are calculated.

Under Medicare's controversial Sustainable Growth Rate (SGR) formula, cuts in physician payments are mandated and automatic whenever growth in these expenditures outstrips growth in Gross Domestic Product. In previous years, as was done in the closing days of 2007, Congress acted at the last minute to postpone such mandated cuts.

In addition to the temporarily postponed 2008 cut, physician fees are scheduled to be reduced by another 5 percent on January 1, 2009, based on the same SRG formula, all at a time when the federal Medicare Payment Advisory Committee has recommended that Congress increase payment rates by 1.7 percent in 2008 in line with the estimated practice cost increase.

ICA will keep members informed of developments on this important issue. Please see ICA's website at www.chiropractic.org for breaking news on this and other topics.

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