



Health Care: Maintaining Quality, Increasing Access

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

A national debate is under way on how we can improve delivery of health care, both in Texas and nationwide. It's an important debate, with two distinct points of view.

One side wants to move us toward a government-run, single-payer health care system. The other side wants to retain choice and personal options, including private health insurance, as a major factor in health care delivery.

It's important to remember that at its best, American health care is the best in the world. But access to our system is uneven, and Texas has the highest rate of uninsured citizens of any state.

We have work to do. I strongly favor reforms of our system that keep patients—not government—in charge of making health care decisions. Socialized medicine has been proven to reduce quality, increase inefficiency, raise taxes and lead to rationing of health care.

We need to build on the strengths of our current system by increasing transparency and competition. Health insurance that encourages consumer choice could be expanded and made more affordable through tax breaks and other incentives. We should allow workers to carry health insurance with them when they change jobs, and small businessmen to band together for better insurance rates. These steps would improve our current system, producing lower costs, greater access and still more innovation in health care.

One current skirmish in the ongoing debate is over renewal of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). This program was started in 1997 to cover children whose families earn too much to qualify for Medicaid, but not enough to afford health insurance. The federal government assists states by providing three-quarters of program costs.

SCHIP has been highly successful. Some 6.6 million children have benefited. Along with virtually everyone in Congress, I strongly believe it should be renewed and even expanded. I voted for a renewal bill called Kids First that provided a \$10 billion increase in funding, to \$35 billion over five years, and would enroll an additional 1.3 million children.

But the Congressional majority rejected that plan as too miserly. Only in Washington, D.C. could a 40 percent increase in funding be considered a "cut." They opted instead for a \$60 billion plan that accommodates families with an income of \$83,000, inviting a veto from President Bush.

The Democratic plan extends coverage from working, low-income children—the intended recipient—to parents, single adults and middle class families.

Our state legislature recently took steps to increase enrollment in SCHIP after earlier budget cutbacks during the 2003 economic downturn. The state aims at SCHIP's original beneficiaries—children in families with incomes up to twice the poverty level. Enrollment is now rising sharply.

The majority party's plan would have confiscated \$660 million in federal funds that Texas has left unspent from the last two fiscal years, and redistribute it to northern states for use outside its purpose. Kids First would preserve that money for at least two years, with extensions possible.

Three-quarters of our state's uninsured children are already eligible for either Medicaid or SCHIP, but they haven't been signed up. Texas is now attempting to do just that. Kids First provides \$700 million for funding and enrolling uninsured kids, but the majority plan contains only token funds for outreach.

There is no doubt that Kids First is better for Texas. The majority plan makes sense only for those who want to see taxes increase and incremental steps toward a single-payer, government-run health care system.

I believe socialized medicine would be a major mistake for our state and our country. People from all over the world come to the U.S. for health care when it's denied, or unavailable in their socialized systems.

Still, our current system can and should be improved. Let's work together to make sure we preserve what is right with American medicine—the best in the world—even as we improve its accessibility and affordability.

Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column