

By Jodi Feldman
Washington Correspondent

Congress examines access bills

A Democrat-backed health care reform bill is emerging as one of the most prominent insurance reform proposals among more than 20 House and Senate bills.

The legislation, "HealthAmerica: Affordable Health Care for All Americans Act" (S. 1227), would attempt to provide universal access to health care for all Americans through what is known as a "play or pay" system. Employers would be allowed to choose between offering health insurance to their employees and dependents (to "play") or contribute to a public program which will provide coverage for those without employer-based insurance (to "pay").

The bill was introduced in June by Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Maine) and other Democratic leaders, including Labor and Human Resources Committee Chairman Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and the chairmen of the two finance subcommittees that oversee health spending, John "Jay" Rockefeller IV (D-W. Va.), and Donald Riegle, Jr. (D-Mich.). The bill represents nearly two years work by members of the Senate Labor and Human Resources and Finance committees.

Other bills range from sweeping reform plans to incremental changes in specialized areas, including medical liability.

"Access to affordable, quality health care should be a right for all Americans, not merely a luxury for those who have the economic means to purchase health insurance," Sen. Mitchell said at a news conference announcing the introduction of the bill.

While the bill's provisions received



R. Michael Jenkins/Congressional Quarterly

Sens. Mitchell, Rockefeller and Kennedy (left to right) introduced legislation that attempts to provide universal access to health care.

mixed reviews, health, labor and business leaders alike applauded the introduction of the legislation as a first step toward action on health care reform.

"This bill is the first indication that Congress is getting serious about reforming a health care system that is too expensive relative to the quality of services," National Association of Manufacturers President Jerry Jasinowski said.

While she did not endorse the bill, AAP President Antoinette Parisi Eaton, M.D., complimented Senate leaders on their efforts to improve access to health care and for setting the stage for formal congressional debate.

At a June 12 Labor and Human Resources Committee hearing which examined how the HealthAmerica plan would affect children, Dr. Eaton discussed the AAP "Children First" legislative proposal which is currently being drafted for introduction in the

House of Representatives by Rep. Robert Matsui (D-Calif.) (see June 1991 AAP News).

"Using the Academy plan as a benchmark to evaluate all other health care access plans, [we] intend to speak out at every opportunity to ensure that children and pregnant women are first...on the priority list to receive the health care they need," Dr. Eaton said. "Based on that benchmark, we are pleased that the HealthAmerica Act embraces many of the concepts that the Academy views as essential to health care system reform."

Dr. Eaton called on Congressional leaders to address the following in any health care reform bill:

- Require a basic benefit package.
- Eliminate financial barriers to health care.
- Refocus Medicaid dollars in a more efficient and effective program.
- Provide preventive services, in-

cluding prenatal, well-child and adolescent care.

- Utilize guidelines for quality assurance.
- Require insurance reforms.

The Mitchell proposal calls for incremental reform that would address the needs of children and pregnant women first. It also guarantees basic benefits under health insurance plans. But, AAP leaders voiced some concerns about the legislation. Neither preventive dental care nor prescription drugs would be covered as basic benefits. Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment (EPSDT) would be covered only in a public insurance program, not under employer-provided coverage.

When Matsui's "Children First" legislation is introduced as expected later this summer, it likely will be the only proposal which comprehensively meets the special health-care needs of children and pregnant women, AAP Executive Director James Strain, M.D., said.

HealthAmerica proposes a public program called "AmeriCare," which would replace the existing Medicaid program. Those who are not eligible for employer-based health insurance would be eligible to receive health benefits through AmeriCare. Federal standards would be set for eligibility, benefits and reimbursement.

The "play or pay" concept outlined in the HealthAmerica bills follows closely the recommendations of the U.S. Bipartisan Commission on Health Care Reform, better known as the Pepper Commission, which Sen. Rockefeller chaired. Legislation based on the Pepper Commission recommendations (S. 1177) was introduced in May, but attention has focused on the Democratic leadership plan, which includes more extensive cost containment

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AAP to launch immunization campaign

Federal officials, AAP representatives and celebrities will kick off the National Immunization Campaign with an announcement of National Immunization Week at a July 24 news conference in Washington, D.C.

National Immunization Week, Sept. 21 to Sept. 29, will promote the immunization of preschool-age children and will attempt to make Americans more aware of the necessity of immunization and the need for access to health care for children.

The National Immunization Campaign is one of several aspects of the AAP public awareness campaign "Children: Our Future."

AAP President Antoinette Parisi Eaton, M.D., U.S. Surgeon General Antonia Novello, M.D., FAAP, and several Hollywood celebrities will discuss planned immunization week activities at the news conference.

The National Immunization Campaign is a cooperative effort between the Academy and Children's Action Network (CAN), an organization of entertainment industry families who promote children's issues through the media.

Founding families of CAN include: Nancy and Bob Daly, Diana Meehan and producer Gary Goldberg, Lezlie and Mark Johnson, Lorraine and Sid Sheinberg, actress Kate Capshaw and director Steven Spielberg and actor Henry Winkler.

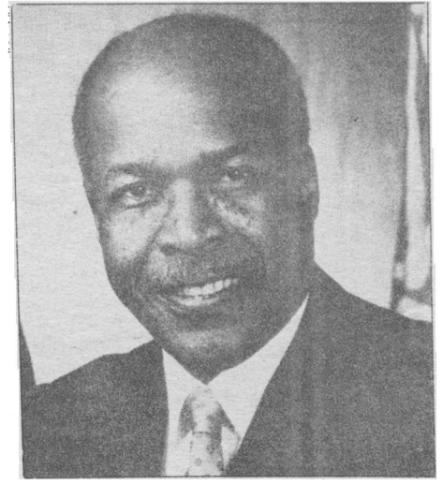
In addition to announcing the Im-



Antonia Novello, M.D.

munization Week, campaign leaders will present the first of a series of TV and radio public service announcements; movie trailers to be shown during the campaign; and a national 1-800 number for immunization information

Dr. Novello and several celebrities will travel to nine cities in which Immunization Week activities will be focused. Those include: Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Huntington, W.V., Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. Each city is developing a local coalition that will work with campaign leaders on various activities, especially immunization drives.



Louis Sullivan, M.D.

Media Conference

The announcement of National Immunization Week will follow the AAP Conference for Media, July 23, in Chicago.

Dr. Eaton plans to release the results of the Gallup poll on immunization, during the conference. AAP Vice President Daniel Shea, M.D., also will discuss immunization issues at the conference.

Dr. Novello and Louis Sullivan, M.D., secretary of U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, will deliver keynote addresses.

The conference also will address the link between education and health, commercialization of children's TV and teen pregnancy.