Senate Endorses Curb On Abortion Coverage

By Helen Dewar
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Senate voted yesterday to continue barring federal workers' health plans from covering costs of most abortions, overriding objections from Democratic women that government employees were being denied benefits available to private sector workers.

The restriction, proposed by Sen. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio), was approved 54 to 45 as part of a $25.2 billion appropriations bill for the Treasury Department, Postal Service and many other agencies for the fiscal year starting Oct. 1. It would prohibit "taxpayer subsidy of abortions" for federal workers except in cases of rape, incest and threat to the life of a woman, DeWine said.

Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) complained that it "singles out female federal employees and denies them a medical benefit enjoyed by all other working women," and Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun (D-Ill.) called it a "gratuitous slap" at women who work for the government.

The restriction has been in effect since 1984 except for fiscal 1994 and 1995, according to DeWine. The House has not yet acted on its version of the bill but has previously approved the provision and it is considered likely to be enacted.

The spending bill, approved 99 to 0, also includes a ban on cost-of-living increases for members of Congress next year and provides increases of various amounts for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the U.S. Customs Service, the Internal Revenue Service, the Secret Service and the executive office of the president.

Spending for the Federal Election Commission, which has an enormous backlog of campaign finance cases, was increased by $835,000 to $29 million. President Clinton had sought $35.4 million for the commission.

The Senate also approved a $90.9 billion spending bill for veterans, housing, science and environmental programs.

The Costly Question: Who Would Collect Premium Increase?

By Clay Chandler
Washington Post Staff Writer

It quacks. It waddles. But do we have to call it a duck?

That, in essence, is the problem vexing President Clinton and congressional Republicans this week as they debate a Senate proposal to raise the Medicare premiums paid by wealthy senior citizens and find themselves at odds over who would collect such an increase.

Both sides profess support for so-called means testing as an essential step to rein in health care spending before the baby boomers hit retirement. But Republicans, fearful of expanding the mandate of an agency many have vilified on the stump, are balking at the notion of collecting the premium increase through the IRS. Clinton, meanwhile, has proposed a thinly veiled alternative that seems unlikely to fool high-income taxpayers.

Neither side seems eager to state the obvious: It is all but impossible to effectively collect an income-based revenue increase without involving the IRS.

Under the Senate proposal, the job of collecting the premium increase would fall to officials at the Department of Health and Human Services and the Social Security Administration. Taxpayers would be billed according to the income on their latest available tax return, and the department would then instruct the Social Security Administration to deduct the amount of the increase from monthly Social Security checks.

Analysts at the Congressional Budget Office said that handling these new duties would cost HHS $30 million to $50 million annually. Also, because of higher overhead and lower compliance, the premium increase would bring in only $3.9 billion in new revenue over the next five years if administered by HHS, according to CBO. That's $5 billion less than the revenue that would be collected if the increase were administered by the IRS.

Treasury officials fear the Senate proposal would lead to huge billing discrepancies, because HHS officials would be obliged to administer premium increases on the basis of three-year-old tax returns. "Of those receiving bills, roughly one-half will be overbilled," a senior Treasury official concluded in a recent memo.

Under Clinton's alternative, high-income seniors would be sent a "Medicare Premium Adjustment Form" with their annual tax instructions. The form would include instructions for calculating income and their Medicare premiums. Beneficiaries would be required to send the Treasury Department a check made out to the "Medicare Trust Fund" by April 15.

"The president's plan seems more workable, at least on its face," said John Rother, lobbyist for the American Association of Retired Persons. "But we still have questions about it."

President Clinton "is not going to go out any further on this limb for Republicans than he absolutely has to," said former CBO director Robert D. Reischauer.

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Stamps

Congress Offers New Way to Raise Money by Mail

By Bill McAllister
Washington Post Staff Writer

Congress has discovered a new way to raise money for breast cancer research: by selling stamps at more than their face value.

Yesterday the House directed the U.S. Postal Service to issue a breast cancer stamp that could be sold with a surcharge of up to 8 cents. The extra money would be dedicated to cancer research efforts, and some legislators predicted it would be the first of a series of special stamps to fund research against various diseases.

Postal officials initially objected to the measure, fearing it would, as Postmaster General Marvin T. Runyon put it, "open the floodgates to all worthy social causes," each demanding stamps for their causes.

Similar legislation cleared the Senate last week, 83 to 17. Shortly before the House vote, a postal spokesman acknowledged the issue's "seeming momentum" and said the Postal Service would obey Congress's wishes.

The House measure was placed on the consent calender, which means the bill cannot be amended, allowing Rep. Susan Molinari (R-N.Y.), its chief sponsor, to claim a final legislative victory before she leaves Congress next month to become a CBS-TV news anchor. "If the Postal Service can issue stamps in honor of Bugs Bunny or Elvis Presley, surely we can ensure the lives and legacies of women who have suffered the ravaging effects of breast cancer will not go unnoticed," she said.

Molinari and other congressional supporters of the legislation predicted that millions of people will happily pay a few extra pennies for stamps to support the research efforts. House backers did not make a prediction of how much money the stamp will raise, but during a Senate debate last week, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) said: "If 10 percent of the first-class stamps were bought through this option it would produce $60 million" for research.

Special commemorative stamps are typically produced in relatively small numbers and yield much less money than Feinstein estimated. A spokeswoman for Canada Post, which recently issued a stamp with a 5-cent surcharge to promote literacy, said it raised about $250,000.

In an apparent effort to overcome concerns that the U.S. stamp would not raise a significant amount, the House measure calls for a surcharge of up to 25 percent of the cost of a first-class stamp, or 8 cents on the current 32-cent first-class stamp. The Senate provision would limit the surcharge to 1 cent over the rate for a first-class letter. Lawmakers will have to reconcile the two versions.

The stamps' opponents had attempted to rally opposition in the Senate last week, contending such stamps are poor fund-raisers. Their efforts failed to derail a bipartisan coalition formed by Feinstein and Sen. Lauch Faircloth (R-N.C.), who ridiculed the agency's opposition.

Citing the Postal Service's recent sales of Bugs Bunny neckties, Faircloth said: "I don't see why . . . they could possibly have a problem with printing this new stamp."

European countries long have issued such stamps, called semipostals by stamp collectors. But postal officials here had resisted pressure for them, saying they would create a major accounting problem, cause confusion among their customers and transform the nation's post offices into fund-raising organizations.

The House bill would allow the Postal Service to deduct "reasonable administrative costs" for creating the stamp. After that, 70 percent of the extra funds would go to the National Institutes of Health and the remainder to the Defense Department for breast cancer research.

The new stamp would be available for a two-year period and the General Accounting Office then would evaluate its success as a fund-raiser.

IN BRIEF

Clinton Would Cut Disparity In Some Cocaine Sentences

President Clinton yesterday endorsed a plan that would reduce but not eliminate disparities in prison sentences for drug crimes involving powder and crack cocaine, even as aides defended him for not going further.

Weighing in on the racially charged issue, Clinton instructed Attorney General Janet Reno and drug policy director Barry McCaffrey to seek congressional approval for the proposal they sent to the White House Monday. "I've accepted it and that's our position and we're going to try to work with Congress now to achieve a resolution," Clinton told reporters yesterday.

Under law, a drug dealer convicted of selling five grams of crack cocaine faces a mandatory five-year prison sentence, while it would take 500 grams of powder cocaine to receive such a term. Many African American leaders consider that 100 to 1 ratio unfair because blacks are disproportionately convicted of crack crimes.

The plan would cut disparity to 10 to 1.

Some critics complained the proposal still was unfair and pressed for parity between the two types of cocaine. White House press secretary Michael McCurry said Clinton would not support that because crack "is associated with much more violent, much more dangerous, much more antisocial behavior."

—Peter Baker

Hill Female Custodians Sue Over Pay

■ For years, Florine Mickens watched her male counterparts get higher pay, even when they picked up the same duster and cloth to clean congressional offices. Yesterday, Mickens and nearly 50 other female custodians—all members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees—signaled they had had enough by taking their case to federal court.

A class-action lawsuit alleging violations of federal civil rights and equal pay laws seeks back pay, compensatory and punitive damages and a pay scale for the mostly female custodians equal to that of the male laborers.

The lawsuit names the architect of the Capitol and the superintendents of the House and Senate as defendants. The architect is responsible for construction, maintenance and cleaning of the Capitol. The architect, Alan Hantman, and Robert Miley, the House superintendent, declined to comment on the pending litigation. The other official was not immediately available for comment. Top pay is $10.08 an hour for custodians, almost all of whom are women, and $11.10 for the mostly male pool of laborers, although they do much of the same work, said Tony Corbo, an organizer for the AFSCME local.

The women took their case to court after three formal mediation sessions failed to resolve the dispute, Corbo said.

—Associated Press

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