

REFORM

MEDICARE PAY FIX BILL SHELVED

A bill that would have eliminated the method which the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services uses to calculate physician fees was shelved in the Senate last month, but could live on in the overall health reform package.

The "Medicare Physician Fairness Act of 2009" was introduced by Senator Debbie Stabenow, (D-Michigan) in October and would have eliminated the Sustainable Growth Rate (SGR), a component of the formula Medicare uses annually to calculate physician fee schedule. Since 2003, Congress has intervened to avoid cuts to physician fees dictated by the SGR.

The bill needed 60 votes to avoid a filibuster, but missed the mark by seven votes.

Days later, the U.S. House of Representatives released a bill that would eliminate the SGR, separating the measure from the 1,900-page overall health reform package it unveiled the day before. The House SGR fix had not been voted on as of press time.

"You've got to incent caring for people, getting preventive care, keeping patients out of higher expensive places where care is delivered," says James Rohack, MD, president of the American Medical Association, which fought for Stabenow's bill. "To do that, you need to get rid of the formula that penalizes that."

PERSONAL FINANCE

LONG-TERM CARE POLICY CAN AFFECT ASSETS



This year, Alabama became the 30th state to launch a long-term care insurance partnership program, which allows residents to protect personal assets if they need to enroll in Medicaid for their nursing care.

In a typical program, every dollar of private coverage a resident purchases in a long-term care policy, that same amount of personal assets will be protected if they choose to enroll in Medicaid after the policy expires, explains Aaron Skloff, CEO of Skloff Financial Group in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey.

"It's an extremely powerful estate planning tool," Skloff says. To find out if your state has a partnership program go to: www.longtermcare.gov.

MEDICAL SCHOOL//BY THE NUMBERS

38,443

Medical school applicants in 1999.

Medical school applicants in 2009.

42,269

16,221

Medical school first-year enrollment in 1999.

Medical school first-year enrollment in 2009.

18,390

Source: Association of American Medical Colleges

STATE ROUNDUP

VERMONT OFFERS FREE E-PRESCRIBING TO PHYSICIANS

VERMONT physicians will receive free access to an e-prescribing program for at least three years, thanks to a \$1 million federal grant received in October. The Vermont Information Technology Leaders Inc, a state nonprofit organization, will provide training and technical support for prescribers using the application, accessed with a web browser or handheld device.

ILLINOIS is awarding bonus payments to physicians who meet or exceed national performance standards in caring for 1.6 million of the state's low-income residents. A state agency evaluated more than 5,000 primary care physicians for: child immunizations, child developmental screenings, asthma management, diabetes management, and breast cancer screening.

GETTY IMAGES / ANDERSEN ROSS