

In almost every public poll that asks Americans what domestic issue most concerns them, health care is almost always listed among in the top three. As a matter of public policy, health care dominates the debate, both in the state of Maryland and in Washington.

This year in the U.S. House, we have already passed several critical health-related measures, including legislation to lift the restrictions President Bush placed on embryonic stem cell research; to require the Secretary of Health and Human Services to negotiate lower prescription drug prices; and to prohibit insurers from denying coverage to healthy individuals or charging higher premiums based solely on a genetic predisposition.

Despite these important first steps, there is much more that must be done to improve the way our nation provides health care services to its citizens. One of the greatest challenges before us is decreasing the massive rolls of the uninsured. Currently, there are more than 45 million Americans without health insurance coverage, 9 million of which are children. Quite simply, this is a national scandal.

It is simply unacceptable that in a country as prosperous as ours, 9 million children - one out of nine children - lack any covered access to health care services, while more than 20 million more who rely on Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) endure considerable limitations to care.

Earlier this year, for example, a 12-year old boy from Prince George's County – Deamonte Driver – died from a brain infection caused by an abscessed tooth. His Medicaid coverage had lapsed and he was denied access to basic dental services.

Cases like Deamonte's are precisely why the 110th Congress has made reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) a top priority. Unfortunately, President Bush's budget request for SCHIP fails to keep pace with inflation, preventing millions of children from getting coverage and putting even greater strain on states' coffers.

In the House, we are working to pass a \$50 billion SCHIP enhancement bill this summer that would ensure states have the resources they need to make sure that all children who are eligible are enrolled. In Maryland, that would mean 60,000 more children getting the medical coverage that they need. Our SCHIP legislation will also focus on improving access to dental care by improving reimbursement rates to dentists.

Clearly, Maryland's doctors are the on the front line in the effort to ensure the health and well-being of our residents, particularly our elderly. That is why I am committed to working with physician groups to ensure that Medicare fairly reimburses physicians for their services. Some data show that Maryland ranks in the bottom quartile for reimbursement payments to doctors and health care providers. And, since 2002 the "sustainable growth rate" (SGR) that governs annual updates in Medicare has called for reductions in payment rates. Cuts of 40 percent are anticipated over the next eight years.

Certainly, we must reexamine the SGR, but doing so will require significant investments, which must be balanced with other national priorities. But as we work to get our fiscal house back in order at the federal level and reverse years of irresponsible budget and tax decisions, we must take steps to ensure that physicians can afford to serve our nation's elderly and needy.

The key point to remember as we look to make improvements in our health care system is that investing a few dollars up front will save many more later on. Investments for immunizations, obesity prevention, smoking cessation,

and research - just to name a few - will help us reduce patient care and hospital costs and prevent the government from having to spend more later on mandatory costs in Medicaid and Medicare.

Unfortunately, the Bush Administration has pushed spending levels over the years that have eroded our health care safety net. For example, the Administration proposed only a 1.6 percent increase in discretionary health programs for Fiscal year 2008.

Additionally, the Administration's budget request for National Institutes for Health (NIH) is woefully inadequate to meet our growing research needs. I have supported a 6.7 percent increase in funding for FY08 that would adjust NIH funding for inflation and add a modest 3 percent rise to help make up for losses in inflation-adjusted funding since 2004. Greater funding investments in NIH and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will ensure that our leading federal health agencies have the resources they need to sufficiently address the nation's public health needs.

Surely, in the days and months ahead, Congress will work to make improvements to our health care system so that you - our front-line providers of public health services – can provide quality care to all those in need.

I look forward to working with the medical community to implement necessary reforms, so that the United States – which has the most professional, dedicated and knowledgeable providers in the world – can address our shortcomings and fulfill our promise to the American people.

Congressman Steny H. Hoyer represents Maryland's 5th Congressional District and serves as the House Majority Leader in the 110th Congress