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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

• OCTOBER 21, 2009

Fight Over Medicare Cuts Plays Into Larger Debate

Democrats Seek to Keep Bill to Maintain Payments to Doctors Separate From Health-Care Overhaul; Costs Are Questioned

By [GREG HITT](#) and [JANET ADAMY](#)

WASHINGTON -- Senators battled Tuesday over legislation to forestall a cut in Medicare payments to doctors, trying to seize the advantage in the larger health debate.

Medicare's reimbursement schedule calls for a 21% drop in payments to doctors beginning in January. Top Democrats are proposing to upend that arrangement and instead freeze doctor payments at this year's level for the next decade. They seek to do so in a bill -- separate from the overhaul legislation -- that they said would shore up the government health program for the elderly.

Republicans and some Democrats questioned the price of the Medicare measure -- \$247 billion over 10 years -- and said proponents haven't offered any new revenue sources or spending cuts to offset the cost.

The Senate's No. 2 Republican, Jon Kyl of Arizona, complained that the change in doctor payments was being taken out of the broader bill -- which President Barack Obama has promised won't raise the federal budget deficit -- and moved as a freestanding measure. "I see it as a transparent attempt to take the deficit off the table," he said.

Supporters of the bill say the sharp payment cuts, unless reversed, would encourage doctors to stop seeing Medicare patients.

"We are going to make sure that senior citizens have the ability to go to a doctor when they're sick," Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D., Nev.) said Tuesday. "That's the key. We want to make sure that more doctors take Medicare patients, not less."

The bill is supported by the American Medical Association and AARP, the lobbying group for seniors. Adoption of the measure would take one of the most contentious and costly issues off the table as the White House and Democrat-controlled Congress prepare for floor debate this fall on the broader bill.

But Mr. Reid is struggling to find the 60 votes needed to bring the bill to the floor, in part because of questions in his own party. Centrist Democrats worried about the budget deficit are pushing for a more modest bill, perhaps one that would suspend the payment cuts for only two years.

The health bill approved by the Senate Finance Committee would have suspended the cuts for one year, at a cost of \$11 billion. That was paid for in the context of the larger health overhaul bill. In the House, Democratic leaders also hope to push forward legislation changing Medicare's payment system, but details haven't been worked out.

Mr. Reid signaled he was open to compromise. "It could be a one-year fix; it could be a 10-year fix," he said. But the fight underlines the challenges for Democrats in the weeks ahead, and has given Senate Republicans opposed to the White House's health initiative a new line of attack.

Sen. John Cornyn (R., Texas) said the Medicare payment bill is designed to get around Mr. Obama's pledge not to sign a health overhaul bill that adds "one dime" to deficit. "This adds a lot of dimes," he said.

Republicans are threatening to offer a range of amendments, including proposals to pay for the legislation and a measure to limit medical malpractice lawsuits, which critics say are driving up health costs.

Top officials from the AMA and AARP pressed lawmakers to move forward on the Medicare bill. "We will be letting our members know how senators vote," said David Sloane, a senior vice president at AARP.

"There's widespread agreement that this formula is broken," added James Rohack, president of the AMA, which represents a chunk of the nation's doctors. "It's time now to take action."

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Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A8

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