

## House Narrowly Passes Senate Bill and Fixes to it: Process Ugly but Nearly Done

At approximately 11:30 p.m. Sunday evening, the United States House of Representatives voted 219 to 212 to enact the Senate version of the health reform legislation (H.R. 3590), and then moments later, voted 220 to 211 to enact a reconciliation bill (H.R. 4872) that made changes to that bill that now will be forwarded to the Senate. During the historic debate yesterday, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV), presented to House Democrats the commitment of 52 Democratic Senators to accept the changes to the bill passed in the House. As the Senate consideration of the changes will be done through the process of reconciliation, only a simple majority will be required to pass it. Therefore, it looks as if, after more than a year of work, comprehensive health reform legislation will soon become law.

Both of Maine's House members, Representative Mike Michaud (D-2nd District) and Representative Chellie Pingree (D-1st District), voted for the bills. For details of the provisions in the bill, refer to the *Special Alert* sent to members last Friday afternoon. But in a nutshell, the bill eventually provides health insurance coverage to 32 million people now uninsured, bars insurance companies from denying coverage to individuals in poor health, and sets up health insurance exchanges where self-employed individuals and small businesses can pool together to buy coverage.

President Obama is expected to sign the bill within two days. And within another week or two, upon completion of the Senate's work, he is expected to sign the second bill making the important changes to the bill.

On Friday, after reviewing the provisions in the bill, the American Medical Association announced its qualified support for it. Most of the primary care groups had announced support for the bill, while most of the surgical specialties opposed the Senate bill and the announced changes to it.

Watch the *Maine Medicine Weekly Update* for more detailed analysis of how the provisions in the legislation will impact on the State of Maine and on your practice.

"Passage of the bill is not the end of this process," noted Gordon Smith, MMA EVP, "rather it is the beginning of a long period of assessment and implementation. MMA will be prepared to help its members understand it and deal with it. After more than a year's effort, the bill is not as good as it might have been, but it is certainly not the unmitigated disaster that critics have made it out to be. In fact, when reviewed in the context of other reform efforts, it is pretty middle-of-the-road building as it does on the existing system of employer paid health insurance and relying on for-profit commercial insurers to provide the bulk of coverage. If the process had not been so infected by the toxin of partisanship, it would be seen as containing as many Republican approaches to reform as Democratic."

You can find the AMA's statement on last night's vote on the web at: <http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/health-system-reform/health-system-reform-passage.shtml>.

There is still the immediate need to fix the Medicare payment system for physicians, and legislation is expected to deal with that issue prior the end of April. While the AMA and virtually all other medical organizations are calling for a permanent repeal of the sustainable growth rate (SGR) formula, but at a cost of over \$200 billion, permanent repeal may simply not be possible.