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MAY 9, 2006

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STATEMENT OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY
CLOTURE ON MOTION TO PROCEED TO ENZI-NELSON
(AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY)

This should be a historic week. The Senate has the opportunity at last to have a debate on the basic questions of health care.

Senator Enzi has put forward a proposal that deserves debate and the opportunity for amendment. I commend him for his diligence in bringing forward his proposal.

But after careful study and debate, I believe the Senate will conclude that the course laid out in this proposal is the wrong one for health care.

The legislation will make health care coverage less affordable and less accessible for millions of Americans.

It will raise premiums for Americans when they are older or when they fall ill. It will mean the end of laws to guarantee coverage for cancer, for diabetes, for mental health parity, and other essential services. It will undermine the laws that protect consumers from fraud and abuse, and it will give no real help to the self-employed.

We have a better approach. The proposal offered by Senator Durbin and Senator Lincoln will allow small businesses to band together to get the same low rates offered to larger employers. It provides real help for small businesses with the high cost of health care through tax credits and a reinsurance program to defray the cost of the most expensive claims.

When our debate concludes, I believe the Senate will agree with the over 200 organizations who have written letters of opposition to this legislation. These organizations represent patients with diabetes and cancer and mental health needs. They represent older Americans, workers, health care professionals, small businesses, and Americans in all walks of life.

They represent the over 15,000 Americans who have called the Senate to ask this body to oppose legislation that will take a step backward from our commitment to quality health care. And they represent the millions more who will be harmed if we do not reject the legislation before us.

We have heard from governors, insurance commissioners and attorneys general from Maine to Hawaii, and from Florida to Alaska. All of them have urged the Senate to reject this bill.

I urge my colleagues to oppose the current legislation B but I hope you will vote to proceed to consideration of this bill. The Senate has been denied the chance to take action on major health priorities far too long.

Next week, seniors will be forced to pay a steep penalty if they are unable to navigate through the tangle of confusing Medicare plans and options. The Senate ought to vote on Senator Nelson's proposal to let seniors make their choice without the threat of heavy fines if they do not meet this arbitrary deadline.

The Republican Medicare law also includes a provision so contrary to common sense that people hardly believe you when you tell them it was included. The legislation made it illegal for Medicare to bargain for discounts on drugs for seniors. We have a proposal to end that shameful prohibition, and we should vote on that proposal.

On Medicaid, we should take action to end the cruel cuts imposed on the poorest of our fellow citizens by the Deficit Reduction Act, which paid for tax cuts for the wealthy through health cuts for the poor.

We have been promised and promised that the Senate would vote on drug importation, but the vote never comes. Senator Dorgan, Senator Snowe, Senator McCain and I have a proposal to allow safe importation of lower cost medicines from Canada and elsewhere. Surely, health week is the time for a vote.

Before the week is out, the Senate should see that the promise of stem cell research is no longer denied to the millions of patients and their families who look on with anger and bewilderment as the bill passed by the House languishes for month after month in the Senate.

And we have failed year in and year out to fulfill the promise of this century of the life sciences, by making quality health care a right for every American. Let us at long last take action to extend quality health care to every American.

So I say to my colleagues, vote for cloture on this motion. Vote for a health care debate. Vote for the chance to go on record with your answer to these important questions on Medicare, on Medicaid, on stem cells, on drug importation, on coverage, and on many other health priorities.

Let us have a debate and let the Senate decide where it stands.

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