

How Americans pay for health care has been a growing concern for years, and the last six months haven't offered much clarity on the issue, especially for the Central Coast.

One key segment of the health insurance industry that affects millions of Americans is Medicare, particularly how much doctors are reimbursed for treating Medicare patients. The immediate crisis of a 10.6 percent cut in reimbursement rates was averted, although it took votes in the House and Senate to override a presidential veto. The bill will delay any decrease in compensation for doctors for 18 months.

Although I am pleased that doctor reimbursement rates will remain intact (in fact, they'll increase by 1.1 percent), I am disappointed that Congress was unable to fix a related problem unique to our area. Doctors in Monterey, Santa Cruz and San Benito counties receive lower Medicare payments than doctors in nearby Santa Clara County. This anomaly is due to a convoluted factor in the payment formula called GPCI, short for the geographic practice cost index.

This GPCI factor is applied by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to geographic localities designated as long ago as 1966 in order to determine local doctor payments. The House passed legislation of mine to correct this GPCI problem (HR 3162, Sec. 308) but the Senate has so far refused to go along.

Nonetheless, GPCI will continue to be a priority and I will work on this issue until it is resolved. However it is accomplished, Central Coast doctors deserve to receive fair and full payment for treating Medicare patients.

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