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**FLOOR STATEMENT BY SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY ON
MISPLACED PRIORITIES OF “HEALTH WEEK”**

(AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY)

We are in the age of the life sciences. American ingenuity is the source of countless innovations that offer new opportunities to save lives and reduce suffering. “Health Week” ought to be a time of celebration -- a time when we give thanks that the promise of quality health care has been fulfilled for every American. We ought to be able to celebrate a nation where health care is a right and not a privilege -- where no American must choose between a visit to the doctor and paying the rent or putting food on the table.

That is the vision we *should* have achieved – but obviously, we have not succeeded. Instead, time and again, narrow self-interest has defeated proposals to extend the benefits of health care to all Americans. Because of these wrong choices, the promise of this century of the life sciences is denied to millions of Americans. The miracles of modern medicine are beyond their reach, and something as basic as a regular visit to the family doctor is a distant dream.

There are 46 million Americans without health insurance – that’s six million more now than in the year President Bush was elected.

Nearly two thirds of those who are uninsured report that high costs deterred them from filling a prescription, seeing a specialist when needed, or getting recommended medical treatment. In hospital and out, young or old, black or white, they receive less care, suffer more, and are 25% more likely to die than those who are insured.

Even for those who have coverage, health care is becoming more and more unaffordable. Health insurance premiums have leapt by a shocking 73 percent since the year 2000, but the general growth of wages and prices in that period was only 13.6 percent.

These soaring increases in health care costs come at a time when working families are under siege economically. Gas prices have more than doubled since President Bush took office. College tuition is up 45 percent. Housing by 44 percent. The list goes on and on and up and up.

With this growing health care crisis of accessibility and affordability, “Health Week” ought to be a call for action, a summons to put forward serious proposals to solve

the major health care challenges we face. But no, that's not what this so-called "Health Week" is all about.

Instead of grasping the historic opportunity for a real debate on health care, the Senate leadership has squandered half the week trying to penalize patients who are seriously injured by medical malpractice. Instead of a debate on providing health care to every American, the leadership has devoted time to a proposal from the Chairman of our health committee that -- no matter how well intentioned or honorably proposed -- will worsen health care for millions of Americans.

The missed opportunities of the current "Health Week" are all the more tragic because Congress has shown in the past what can be done when the will and the desire and the urgency are felt to make the promise of health care a reality.

We made historic progress with the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965. Medicare brought the promise of good health and active and productive lives to millions of American seniors. The Medicaid program is key to promoting a real culture of life in America. A third of all mothers giving birth receive their care through Medicaid.

We took another major step in 1996 with the enactment of HIPAA to see that Americans who changed jobs did not lose their health insurance.

And we extended the promise of good health to millions of children with the passage of the Children's Health Insurance Program in 1997.

But too often in recent years, the tide has turned the wrong way, and the gains of the past have been undermined. We have seen too many examples of that already this year.

In February, the President signed legislation to impose savage cuts on Medicaid. According to the Congressional Budget Office, that bill will cause 45,000 poor Americans to lose coverage over the next five years, and 65,000 will lose coverage within 10 years. About 60 percent of those losing coverage will be children.

That same month, the White House sent to Congress a budget proposal with cuts that dwarf even those just enacted.

Even opportunities to improve Americans' health care have been wasted.

We had a good Medicare drug bill in the Senate, supported by a broad bipartisan majority. But that bill was hijacked once the White House entered the negotiations. Instead of building on the Medicare program that seniors know and trust, the drug program was turned over to HMOs and other private insurance plans, enticed to participate by massive subsidies -- funds that should have gone to strengthen benefits.

Now the Administration is poised to compound these errors by imposing steep

finances on seniors who have not been able to navigate through the tangle of options to select a drug program.

There are challenges unmet in public health and medical research too.

One of these is the growing threat of avian flu. Throughout the year, millions of Americans have watched with growing alarm as the flu virus has spread from Asia to the Middle East to Europe — yet preparations in America lag far behind those in other nations.

In medical research, we have seen the potential of stem cell research denied as the Senate has failed to take action on bipartisan legislation approved by the House to overturn the unwarranted restrictions that the Bush Administration imposed on this lifesaving research.

In the heartland of our nation, we have seen one of our great cities almost destroyed by flood, and a whole region laid waste by hurricanes. Major hospitals were turned into ruins, and tens of thousands of residents of the Gulf Coast needed emergency medical care.

But according to the Senate leadership, there is no time to debate proposals to improve our readiness for avian flu, or to unlock the power of stem cell research, or restore the health care system of the Gulf Coast.

Perhaps this week's greatest missed opportunity can be seen the simple fact that "Health Week" follows "Cover the Uninsured Week." In a nation of extraordinary wealth and limitless creativity, there should be no need for a "Cover the Uninsured Week". We should simply not permit 46 million of our fellow citizens to go without regular access to health care.

For this Administration, last week should really have been called "Discover the Uninsured Week," because for seven days every year, they give speeches and say fine words about the uninsured -- then spend the other 51 weeks blocking serious proposals to extend coverage to the families who face bankruptcy and ill health because they have no source of health care.

"Health Week" may be our last opportunity this Congress to have a serious debate on extending coverage to the uninsured, but I fear that the Senate leadership will squander this chance too.

We should use this week to consider a proposal to extend Medicare to every American. We should vote on legislation to extend CHIP coverage to the parents of the children who receive care through that program.

Around the nation, states are leading the way where the federal government has failed to act. In my own state of Massachusetts, Republicans and Democrats came

together with business leaders, health care professionals, community leaders, and citizens from all walks of life to craft a proposal that will extend the benefits of health care coverage throughout the Commonwealth. On the floor of the United States Senate this week we should be debating proposals to assist the efforts of states to put affordable health care within the grasp of their citizens. Instead, the legislation we will consider undermines state efforts to find workable solutions to the health care problems they face.

The Senate has had time to give tax favors to millionaires and protect the profits of the oil companies, and time for bankruptcy legislation written by the credit card companies. In the weeks to come, we'll have no end of time for election year posturing on proposals cooked up in the back rooms of a political consultant's office that have no chance of becoming law. We have had time for all measures, but I fear there will be no time allowed to vote on proposals that truly address the health care crisis. If so, what a mockery it would be to call this "Health Week."

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