

Wis. could be first to require cochlear implants

April 23 2009, By RYAN J. FOLEY , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Wisconsin could become the first state requiring private insurance companies to cover cochlear implants for children with severe hearing problems. The state Legislature passed a bill Thursday requiring private health insurance plans to cover cochlear implants, hearing aids and related treatment for those under the age of 18. Gov. Jim Doyle has promised to sign it into law.

While hearing aids help some [children](#) with [hearing loss](#), those with more severe problems may be candidates for [cochlear implants](#). The devices turn sound into electrical impulses that activate the hearing nerve, allowing the deaf to hear.

Supporters say some families with deaf children cannot afford to pay for implants that cost \$50,000 or more when excluded by [insurance](#) policies. They say getting the devices early is critical to help children develop their language skills.

"This bill is going to allow children to keep their hearing, to become members of society, to go to school and keep a job," said state Rep. David Cullen, D-Milwaukee.

Several states already require insurance companies to cover some [hearing](#) aid costs, but advocates said Wisconsin would be the first to extend the mandate to cochlear implants.

The measure, which allows insurers to apply cost-sharing provisions for

the procedures, passed the Senate on a voice vote and by an 80-16 margin in the Assembly.

Opponents, which included some Republicans and business groups, said the mandate would drive up costs for small businesses and employees struggling to afford health care costs.

The potential cost of the mandate is unclear and will vary widely by company, said Phil Dougherty, senior executive officer of the Wisconsin Association of Health Plans.

Roughly 1.6 million residents with private insurance would be affected by the bill. Others in self-funded plans will not be bound by the mandate, and most government-funded plans such as Medicaid already cover the devices.

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