

GOP: Health test recommendations could affect care

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Senate Minority Leader Sen. Mitch McConnell of Ky., center, gestures during a health care reform news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington, Friday, Nov. 20, 2009. From left are, Sen. Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., McConnell, Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, and Senate Minority Whip Jon Kyl of Ariz. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta)

(AP) -- Republicans are seizing on this week's recommendations for fewer Pap smears and mammograms to fuel concern about government-rationed medical care - and to try to chip away support by women for President Barack Obama's proposed health care overhaul.

"This is how rationing starts," declared Jon Kyl of Arizona, the party's second-in-command in the Senate, during a news conference. "This is what we're going to expect in the future."

Said Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska: "Those recommendations will be used by the insurance companies as they make a determination as to what they're going to cover."

Democrats said the recommendations had nothing to do with the big [health care](#) bill. And besides, they said, the recommendations, especially one that women start mammograms at 50 rather than 40, were deeply flawed.

"It's entirely possible that this panel got it wrong, and I think they did," said Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin, the vote-counting Democratic whip. Fears that the government is going to run health care have not come up during negotiations for Saturday's crucial procedural vote, Durbin added.

But the recommendations have given Republicans something new to talk about in making their case that the 2,074-page bill amounts to government-rationed health care.

The timing of the release of both sets of guidelines this week, though apparently coincidental, couldn't have been worse for majority Democrats. The bill faces its first survival test Saturday, when it must win 60 votes to advance to the next step. In recent days, Democratic leaders have struggled to placate three holdouts from their caucus but appeared Friday night to be winning them over.

One Democrat wasn't taking chances on whether the recommendations had jeopardized access to affordable mammograms. Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., said she would introduce an amendment that would limit the costs of the breast cancer tests for women 40 and older.

"Otherwise, insurance companies may use this new recommendation as yet another reason to deny women coverage for mammograms," Mikulski said.

That was unlikely, the White House said.

"Under health insurance reform, recommendations like these cannot be used to dictate coverage," said presidential spokesman Reid Cherlin.

The guidelines themselves stress that they're general recommendations for routine screening, not a replacement for the one-on-one health advice that women with various risk factors for breast or cervical cancer get from their doctors in choosing how often to get a Pap or mammogram.

"So, what does this mean if you are a woman in your 40s? You should talk to your doctor and make an informed decision about whether a mammography is right for you based on your family history, general health and personal values," said Dr. Diana Petitti, vice chair of the task force that made the mammogram recommendations.

Still, the new guidelines generated enough confusion and raised enough questions to force proponents of the health care overhaul on the defensive.

Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius has said the mammogram recommendation "does not determine what services are covered by the federal government."

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus said the Senate health care bill he authored "doesn't do one single thing to change current law related to the way coverage decisions are made."

"Those decisions will be based only on science and thorough review, just as they are today," said Baucus, D-Mont. "Research comparing the effectiveness of different treatments for different patients cannot be used for rationing care."

"We're not rationing anything," said Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Calif. "It's a decision between a woman and her doctors."

The specter of the government making deeply personal medical decisions for millions of Americans - in this case, women - has been propelled in part by the Republican drive to stymie the Democratic bill.

The legislation would require most people to buy health insurance, and the House version would create a government plan that would compete with those offered by private insurers.

This week's recommendations from two different groups called for less-frequent cancer tests for women.

On Monday, a government-appointed but independent panel of doctors and scientists said women generally should begin routine mammograms in their 50s, rather than their 40s.

Then on Friday, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists said that most women in their 20s can have a Pap test every two years - instead of annually - to catch slow-growing cervical cancer.

Neither the task force, which provides advice to government officials who may or may not act on it, nor the ACOG set federal policy. The ACOG's recommendations are aimed at its own members.

The Democratic bill would set up an independent institute to conduct studies. It would not authorize the health secretary to deny coverage solely based on the institute's research.

There are other safeguards. All states except Utah make insurers cover [mammograms](#), and 20 states require coverage that starts at age 40,

according to 2007 data compiled by the Washington-based National Women's Law Center.

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