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# Obama talks health care to doctors

**Reform** | In a speech in Chicago, the president tells the AMA that "the public option is not your enemy"

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WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama went before a convention of receptive but wary doctors Monday to make the economic case for health care overhaul, both for the nation and for the physicians' own bottom lines.

As he spoke in Chicago to the annual conference of the American Medical Association, lawmakers in Congress began wrestling with the price tag for Obama's chief domestic priority, which he acknowledged would likely entail upfront costs of at least \$1 trillion over a decade, before any significant savings would result.

To pay for Obama's plan, Congress is considering tax increases and spending cuts different from the ones he has put on the table. House Democrats, for example, are considering a tax on soft drinks and a value-added tax, a broad-based consumption tax similar to the sales taxes levied by many states.

An analysis released Monday raised the hurdles for draft legislation in the Senate just as its Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee planned to begin

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Obama took the cost issue head-on in Chicago.

"The cost of inaction is greater," he told the doctors, because rising health care prices are "an escalating burden on our families and businesses" and "a ticking time bomb for the federal budget."

Opening a week in which health care will dominate attention in Congress, the president's Monday speech was the latest example of an oft-used ploy to press his cause: Appearing before skeptical audiences, confident of his powers of persuasion but willing as well to say what his listeners do not want to hear.

Obama spoke just days after the AMA had signaled opposition to his proposal for a new public health insurance plan to compete with private insurers as part of a menu of choices much like the one for members of Congress.

"The public option is not your enemy. It is your friend, I believe," Obama said, diverging from his prepared remarks.

Obama drew repeated applause, and even some standing ovations, when he called for incentives to get more medical students to go into primary care instead of the more lucrative specialty practices, and when he pledged to work with doctors to reduce their often unnecessary "defensive medicine" to avoid malpractice lawsuits. But scattered boos met his follow-up remark when he said he opposed any cap on malpractice awards.

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# Health care: President gets applause, and some boos

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voting Wednesday. Just hours after Obama finished his speech, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office concluded that a plan by the committee's Democratic leaders, Sens. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and Chris Dodd of Connecticut, reduces the number of uninsured only by a net 16 million people. Even if the bill becomes law, the budget office said, 36 million people would remain uninsured in 2017.

Robert Reischauer, an economist who headed the CBO when Congress tackled the health issue during the Clinton administration, said that if so many people remained uninsured, it might not be feasible to cut special federal payments to hospitals that serve many low-income people.

Obama said Saturday that the government could save \$106 billion over 10 years by cutting such hospital payments as more people gained coverage.

Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah, a senior Republican on both Senate committees drafting health legislation, said he found the CBO numbers stunning. He calculated that the Kennedy bill would cost taxpayers \$62,500 per uninsured person over the 10 years.