

Mr. BENTSEN. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to strongly urge the Republican leadership to expedite consideration of two bills which will provide vital consumer protections for medical and genetic information.

The first bill, H.R. 4585, medical privacy legislation, was recently approved by the House Committee on Banking and Financial Services. During consideration of the bill, it would essentially offer an amendment which would for the first time provide real consumer protection for genetic information.

I also urge the House leadership to bring to the floor H.R. 2457, sponsored by our colleague, the gentlewoman from New York (Ms. SLAUGHTER), that would prohibit discrimination based upon genetic information.

With the recent announcement of the completion of the detailed map of the 24 pairs of the human chromosomes of the human genome project, it is vitally important that the Congress act now to protect genetic information.

As a representative of the Texas Medical Center, including the Baylor College of Medicine, where much of this breakthrough work is being done, I believe there is great promise in knowing this information. However, without sufficient protections, we risk that Americans will not agree to participate in gene therapy treatments to cure disease.

The real danger will be the potential to discriminate against individuals in their health insurance, their employment, and in their financial products. I urge the House to act on these important measures today.

MEDICARE-PLUS CHOICE PLANS DROPPED IN MANY PARTS OF RURAL AMERICA

(Mr. SHERWOOD asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. SHERWOOD. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to direct the attention of the House to an alarming trend, denying benefit options to Medicare beneficiaries on the basis of where they live.

The Medicare-plus choice program passed by Congress was intended to offer real health care options under Medicare. However, Americans in rural and smaller urban areas are being dropped from plans at an alarming rate. Many beneficiaries in my district have been notified they no longer have the option of enrolling in the Medicare HMO. It is an outrage that many of the disabled Americans and seniors can no longer enroll in a Medicare HMO because of discriminatory payment rates.

How can HCFA justify a monthly payment rate in my area of \$400, and yet in larger cities of \$700 to \$800? This discrepancy is not justifiable, it offends my basic sense of fairness, and we

must work, Congress and the administration must work together to reverse this trend, and restore the availability of the Medicare-plus choice payment program to all beneficiaries.

CONFERENCE REPORT ON H.R. 4810, MARRIAGE TAX RELIEF RECONCILIATION ACT OF 2000

Ms. PRYCE of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, by direction of the Committee on Rules, I call up House Resolution 559 and ask for its immediate consideration.

The Clerk read the resolution, as follows:

H. RES. 559

Resolved, That upon adoption of this resolution it shall be in order to consider the conference report to accompany the bill (H.R. 4810) to provide for reconciliation pursuant to section 103(a)(1) of the concurrent resolution on the budget for fiscal year 2001. All points of order against the conference report and against its consideration are waived. The conference report shall be considered as read.

Sec. 2. House Resolution 556 is laid on the table.

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. BARR of Georgia). The gentlewoman from Ohio (Ms. PRYCE) is recognized for 1 hour.

Ms. PRYCE of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, for purposes of debate only, I yield the customary 30 minutes to the distinguished ranking member of the Committee on Rules, my friend, the gentleman from Massachusetts (Mr. MOAKLEY), pending which I yield myself such time as I may consume. During consideration of the resolution, all time yielded is for purposes of debate only.

Mr. Speaker, House Resolution 559 provides for the consideration of the conference report on H.R. 4810, the Marriage Tax Penalty Elimination Reconciliation Act of 2000. The rule waives all points of order against the conference report and its consideration, and it provides that the conference report shall be considered as read.

Mr. Speaker, we have certainly heard a lot of debate about the marriage penalty over the past week. Actually, the Republican majority has been working to address this inequity in our Tax Code for the past couple of years, and today's vote marks the fifth time that the House will vote to provide marriage penalty relief during the 106th Congress.

Let us hope that this oft-repeated debate has resonated at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, because it is time once again to put the ball in the President's court. Today's vote will send a stand-alone marriage tax penalty elimination bill to the President's desk for his signature.

We have heard some excuses as to why the President cannot sign this bill. Some argue that this tax relief favors only the rich, but that is just not true. The fact is that this bill helps anyone

who is married, regardless of income, and the people who suffer most under the marriage penalty tax are the middle class.

That is right, the adverse effects of the marriage penalty are concentrated on families with income between \$20,000 and \$75,000. I am sure these folks would be surprised to learn that they are considered as rich. So let us get past the tired old "tax cuts for the rich" rhetoric. Let us do something novel and focus on the policy of the marriage penalty and debate its merits.

The marriage tax penalty is pretty simple to understand. It forces married individuals to pay more in taxes than they would have to pay if they stayed single. So we should ask ourselves, is there any merit to taxing marriage? Is there an acceptable rationale to increasing taxes on individuals based solely on their marital status? Do we want the government to send a message that "You will pay a steep fee to get married, but you can avoid this financial burden if you just stay single and live with that significant other?"

If the answer to these questions is no, then why the resistance to elimination of this punitive tax? And if we can agree that the policy has no merit, then how can we give relief to only some married people and not to others? Is it possible to be too fair?

In my mind, if it is wrong to increase taxes on one couple because they are married, then we should not apply a tax penalty to any couple based on their marital status. Mr. Speaker, it seems to me that our only option in the face of this perverse discriminatory tax is to eliminate it entirely.

There are other arguments against passing this legislation. Some of my colleagues claim that the Republicans do not have their priorities straight because we are putting tax cuts above all else. But again, these accusations ignore the facts. I am pleased to remind my colleagues, Congress has already, already passed legislation to wall off both the social security and Medicare trust funds, already provided affordable, voluntary prescription drug coverage to seniors through Medicare, and already has paid down the national debt. We have also passed appropriation bills that invest more in education, biomedical research, veterans' health care, among many other priority programs.

In fact, while we would never know it from listening to some of the rhetoric, spending on discretionary programs will actually be increased this year. So it is just not true to say that tax cuts are gobbling up resources or stealing funds from needed programs.

The problem is that most of my Democratic colleagues just cannot stand the thought of loosening their grip on Americans' money. I do not know how big the surplus has to be for