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OPINION

Editorial board

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First Amendment quote

"The First Amendment is indispensable as myth, but when it fails as myth, it must prove indispensable as law."

— Hans Linde, former Oregon Supreme Court justice, 1981

GUEST EDITORIAL

State budget contains costly health-care cuts

After months of uncertainty, California finally has a signed budget. Unfortunately, while the final budget may — at first glance — address the state's fiscal bottom-line issues, it will end up costing Californians more in the long run when it comes to the good health of the state and the dollars that will be required to support this good health.

As happens every time the state attempts to tighten its belt, this final budget makes deep cuts to Medi-Cal reimbursement for health care organizations that serve our most vulnerable population: Californians who have limited access to health care for economic and political reasons.

This time around, Medi-Cal optional benefits are being threatened. These benefits include coverage for adult dental care, behavioral health, chiro-

practic services, and others. It's interesting that Medi-Cal refers to these types of services as "optional," when really the word that describes what they all have in common with each other is "preventive." All of these services are geared to promoting good health and preventing disease, in addition to treating illness that already exists.

As I've stated in this very space before (but apparently not loudly or frequently enough) preventive care costs much less than treating disease that already exists.

Allow me to restate that for effect: helping people stay healthy is cheaper than curing them once they're sick. It always has been, and it always will be.

The fate of reimbursement for Medi-Cal optional benefits is tied to this year's budget by a federal funding trigger. That is, by April



HARRY FOSTER
Health care

1st, the Governor must decide whether the state will receive federal stimulus funds in an amount high enough to support continued reimbursement of these services.

If enough funding is not provided from the federal level — and "enough" here really means "at an arbitrary level set by bean-counters in Sacramento" — Medi-Cal reimbursement for optional benefits will grind to a halt on July 1. This, in turn, will cause a domino effect that will

threaten the integrity of the state's health-care safety net.

The effects of possible cuts to reimbursement for optional benefits will be felt in many ways by organizations such as Family HealthCare Network, individuals with limited access to care, and all state taxpayers. Access to primary, preventive care will be compromised, and this lack of access will eventually result in a heavy financial burden on all California taxpayers.

We can pay now for preventive care, or we can pay even more later to treat disease that we could have kept from happening in the first place.

Even if this last argument does not sway you, consider this: most of you reading this article live in a county that currently boasts a double-digit unemployment rate. How certain are you

that you (or someone you care about) won't need a safety-net health-care provider sometime in the next year?

The prudent and logical approach for the governor to take is to not threaten the viability of safety-net health-care providers or the people they serve, but to support the excellent, cost-effective care provided by these organizations. Please contact the governor's office and let him know that you support continued reimbursement for these valuable, cost-effective services.

When everything is considered, it is evident that cutting Medi-Cal optional benefits is not an option that Californians can afford in the long run.

▶ Harry Foster is the chief executive officer of Family Healthcare Network.