

AN EDITOR'S NOTE: HEALTH CARE POLITICS

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As we approach presidential elections this November, South Asian Americans find themselves with a unique opportunity to contribute to the national dialogue. The Republican incumbent and the Democratic challengers will be making a variety of promises to the American people on issues as diverse as American foreign policy to prescription drug plans. In this issue of *The Subcontinental*, we present some of the prospective talking points that will be relevant to the upcoming elections related to health care. *The Subcontinental's* research team has assembled an extensive representation of each candidate's views on health policy issues as pertinent to our readers. Subjects such as tort reform, the future of foreign aid sponsored medical schemes, and health care coverage are all issues that must be closely monitored by any serious community body during this election season. We have provided summaries for each candidate's policy, but it is ultimately up to you to decide to focus your interest on one particular issue or candidacy.

Why Health Care?

The surprising results of the Iowa Caucus and the New Hampshire Primary in have turned the Democratic Primary on its ear. The exit polls indicated that the issues most important to voters were primarily domestic, the economy, health care, etc. It appears that once again we will have a presidential election in this country where health care reform takes the forefront. Health care is also a particularly important issue for the South Asian American community. It is also an issue to which this community can extensively contribute. The South Asian American Policy & Research Institute (SAAPRI) based in Chicago has estimated, analyzing the 2000 Census, that 25% of South Asian Americans work in the health care industry.¹ Additionally, they claim that one in twenty doctors in America are of South Asian decent. As such, the South Asian American community can, and should, be very influential in health policy debates.

Indian American physicians have been networked starting in 1982 with the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin's (AAPI) first pres-

ident Dr. Ujamlal C. Kothari. Since its founding AAPI has grown to over 100 chapters and sponsors an annual legislative conference to inform its member on issues affecting South Asian American physicians. They, however, have not been very proactive in engaging other community organizations. At this point, there is little organizational interaction between AAPI-Legislative and other South Asian/Indian American political organizations.

In 1998, a loose network of South Asian American professionals working in public health joined forces to form the South Asian Public Health Association (SAPHA). In 2000 they began to work on a whitepaper to bring attention to the health care needs of the South Asian American community. Noting that most medical research on ethnic communities in the US is funded based on Census classifications, they discovered a clear lack of information on the medical needs of the South Asian American community. Health problems are largely biological. By lumping South Asian, East Asian, Southeast Asians, and Pacific Islanders together in one category, medical researchers are lumping together two thirds of the world's diversity in a single category. As a result, much goes unseen. To highlight the importance of their work we included four excerpts from SAPHA's whitepaper to highlight often overlooked health concerns for the South Asian American community. **Nadia Islam** writes on the growing problem of cancer. **Susan Ivey** writes on the number one killer of South Asian Americans, heart disease. **Meera Rastogi** writes on an issue that still has a stigma in South Asian American families, mental health. Finally, **Shilpa Patel** uncovers the unpleasant realities of South Asian American substance abuse.

With his 2003 State of the Union Address, President Bush brought the issue of medical malpractice reform to the front of national discourse. Ultimately, this issue may be decided on a national level by the November elections. However, with five percent of physicians in the United States of South Asian origin, it is an issue of great relevance to the South Asian American community. On the heels of recent reforms in Texas, **Sarada Peri** spoke with Senator John Cornyn's office regarding their position on nationalizing caps on medical malpractice liability. Cornyn has been staunch advocate of caps and is one of the key senators leading the charge for a national policy. **Nimish Desai** worked to oppose the Texas legislation. He writes about lessons learned from the effort and what South Asian American doctors should be aware of prior to supporting either side of this debate.

Finally, the global AIDS pandemic is reaching historic proportions. Recently, President Bush took bold initiative to fund efforts to combat HIV/AIDS in Africa where 10% of the population are dying of the dis-

ease. The disease, however, also continues to spread in South Asia, particularly in India. **Priya Bery** summarizes American efforts combat the spread of this virus in India, including the historic contributions of the Gates Foundation. It is an issue around which South Asian Americans can lend much support by showing the same initiative and philanthropic spirit they exhibited following the Gujarat earthquake.

Each of these issues, and many more, will be discussed at length in this election season. As you will see, the each presidential candidate embraces a unique position in all of the various aspects of the health care debate.

The Candidates²

President Bush's most notable accomplishment as President regarding health care has been to pass prescription drug coverage under Medicare by expanding the role of private insurance companies. This plan garnered the prized endorsement of the American Association of Retired Persons

George W. Bush	
Party:	Republican
Home State:	Texas
Experience:	President, United States Governor, Texas Managing Partner, Texas Rangers Business Owner
Born:	July 6, 1946

(AARP). The Republicans are sure to laud this as a major domestic policy success. However, Democrats have argued that privatizing this component of Medicare will weaken the basic foundations of Medicare.

In foreign health policy, the President inaugurated sweeping aid packages to African nations to combat AIDS. While he had been applauded for bringing awareness and funding to combat this epidemic in Africa, many South Asian Americans questioned why more has not been done to prevent the spread of AIDS in South Asia. Further, he has received criticism for backing U.S. pharmaceutical companies who tried to prevent Indian companies from selling cut rate generic AIDS medications to Africa.

Starting with his State of the Union Address, President Bush called for several further reforms that are sure to be major points in the upcoming campaign for reelection. Among these are:

- Expansion of medical savings accounts.
- Collective bargaining for small businesses employee health insurance programs
- Federal medical malpractice liability caps (covered by **Nimish Desai** and **Sarada Peri** later in this issue)
- Tax credits for the uninsured to help them buy health insurance.

These proposals have been well received by physicians and have received extensive support from South Asian Americans doctors and the Indian American Republican Council. However, the plan does not guarantee that all Americans are insured. Likewise, critics argue that it is uncertain that savings accounts, collective bargaining and caps will help control health care costs because as they do not address the root causes of these excessive costs.

Howard Dean

Party:	Democrat
Home State:	Vermont
Experience:	Governor, Vermont Lt. Governor, Vermont Vermont State Representative Medical Doctor
Born:	November 17, 1948

Governor Dean has advocated an \$88.3 billion universal health care plan that will be paid for by repealing the Bush tax cut. The plan consists of four components: (1) expansion of Medicaid to cover all Americans age 25 or younger; (2) adults living at less than 185% of the poverty line will receive coverage

through the expansion of the Child Health Insurance Program plus a tax credit; (3) offer small businesses the option of buying into health plans offered to federal employees; (4) tie in corporate tax deductions in with health insurance for their employees. Dean has also advocated extending health coverage to immigrant children expectant mothers through an Immigrant Children's Health Improvement Act.

The Governor's plan, through it's piecemeal approach, is relatively comprehensive. However, he is vague regarding corporate tie ins. It is unclear how he will tie tax deductions to health insurance. Additionally, he has criticized medical malpractice liability caps claiming that rising costs are part of the system. Addressing this needs thorough reform, not caps that limit the justice system and only remedy the symptoms of the problem. Dean has also endorsed \$30 billion to help combat the global AIDS pandemic.

Senator Edwards has proposed a health care plan that will cover 21 million more Americans at a cost of \$53 billion per year. He proposes funding this plan by eliminating the Bush tax cuts, cutting the non-security related federal workforce by 10%, and eliminating a range of farm, insurance, and banking subsidies. His focus is primarily on insuring children and preserving a safety net for those who are struggling, those under age 25, the elderly, and small businesses. He also plans to provide better incentives for individuals to go in to the nursing profession. A greater supply of nurses reduces workload on

John R. Edwards

Party:	Democrat
Home State:	North Carolina
Experience:	U.S. Senator, North Carolina Trail Lawyer
Born:	June 10, 1953

doctors improving overall care. Currently, many nurses in the US come from overseas, particularly from India and Sri Lanka. Although, Edwards has not weighed in on this particular aspect, one can deduce that working conditions would improve for these immigrant nurses as well.

Perhaps the most intriguing plank of Senator Edwards' health care plan is on medical malpractice reform. As a former trial lawyer, the Senator brings a unique perspective to the table. He proposes to remove antitrust exemptions used by insurers to raise premiums. Also, he plans to hold lawyers accountable by disbarring lawyers who file too many frivolous lawsuits.

Senator Kerry has proposed a large set of programs amounting to \$76 billion dollars a year that expands the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHBP) to private citizens. He plans to provide 75% tax credit to the unemployed, credits to small businesses, and offer federal support for catastrophic care and children's health care.

Regarding medical malpractice reform, John Kerry strongly opposes capping damages, citing that this will neither reduce premium costs for doctors, nor lower the cost of health care for Americans in the states where caps have been enacted. Rather, he supports mandating that individuals receive referrals from a qualified specialist before filing a claim. He supports mandatory sanctions for those who file claims for improper purposes and provide incentives for reducing the number of lawsuits. Finally, Kerry opposes punitive damages unless there is evidence of gross negligence or intentional misconduct.

John F. Kerry	
Party:	Democrat
Home State:	Massachusetts
Experience:	US Senator, Massachusetts Lt. Governor, Massachusetts Attorney Lieutenant, US Marine Corps
Born:	December 11, 1943

Representative Kucinich has proposed a massive "Medicare for All" program amounting to \$2 trillion by 2013. He favors a single-payer universal health care plan similar to the Canadian system. Additionally, he has spoken out in support of legalizing medical use of marijuana, and supports government funding of alternative medicine practices like acupuncture and ayurvedic medicine.

Denis J. Kucinich	
Party:	Democrat
Home State:	Ohio
Experience:	U.S. Congressman, Ohio Ohio State Senator Mayor, Cleveland University Professor
Born:	October 8, 1946

Reverend Sharpton has supported a \$400 billion/year plan for a single-payer health care system. He advocates the passage of a Constitutional

Amendment to make health care a universal right. Surprisingly, despite his interest in events in Africa, Sharpton has said very little about the AIDS pandemic in his platform.

Al Sharpton

Party:	Democrat
Home State:	New York
Experience:	Civil Rights Activist Minister
Born:	October, 3, 1954

The 2004 elections are indeed weighty. Each candidate holds very different views, and not just about health care policy. South Asian

Americans have a unique opportunity to contribute to this vital debate this election season. *The Subcontinental* hopes that this issue will be helpful, both in helping you better understand the issues of the election and better understand the health needs of the South Asian American community.

We hope you find this issue useful. We encourage you feedback. For comments, concerns, and feedback, please send letters to:

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1. From a talk given by Padma Rangaswamy, PhD at the 32nd Annual Conference on South Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison on October 25, 2003. Prof. Rangaswamy was reporting on the findings of her study of the 2000 US Census.
2. Sources include: New York Times online, Washington Post online, Bush Campaign Website, Dean Campaign Website, Edwards Campaign Website, Kerry Campaign Website, Kucinich Campaign Website, Sharpton Campaign Website, and interviews.