

*Remarks for the
Caregivers for Patients Rights Banquet
November 14, 2002*

Thank you, John. I'm glad to be here with you today, because it gives me an opportunity to thank you for the great work you've done in helping make sure the people of this state get the best health care possible.

(story about Jordan / 15-point buck / priorities)

In my state of the state address, I laid out four main priorities for Mississippi – education, jobs, public safety, and health care. Each of them is an important cornerstone in the foundation for Mississippi's growth.

The health care cornerstone means so much to the people of this state, and we have worked hard to keep it strong. Last May, in a speech to the Mississippi Economic Council, I talked about the need to address the affordability and availability of medical malpractice insurance for our doctors.

This was – and I stress the word *was* because you helped us fix this – an important issue for people in our state. We all recognize the importance of every Mississippian having access to quality health care – and the legislation I signed on October 8 helps ensure that is the case.

The health care crisis in Mississippi has been looming over the state for months. After a summer of meetings by a joint legislative committee, I called a special session to address the need for medical malpractice reform and craft a solution to the crisis.

The call for the special session was clear, the need for legislation obvious, and the impact of special interests evident. The issue at hand, however, was not just about the people working the halls of the capitol building; rather, it was about the quality of health care in Mississippi for the people in every community around this state.

After more than a month, the House and Senate were ready to vote on a conference report. The end result of the time spent in conference was a piece of legislation that offered a foundation for better health care in Mississippi.

When I signed the bill into law, I commented that we were sending a message to the rest of the nation that Mississippi is a good place to practice medicine and its people have access to quality health care.

That's a message we want people to hear, but there is still much more that can be done to build on this legislation.

Early in the special session, I proposed an insurance pool, which could be more accurately described as a compensation fund, to help Mississippi's doctors with the affordability and availability of medical malpractice insurance.

This fund offers a tremendous opportunity to further address the short-term needs of the health care community in our state and speed the return of insurance companies to this market.

The work to add the compensation fund to the medical malpractice legislation will not stop. It is an integral component in the strength of our health care in Mississippi.

As we continue to improve health care, the day-to-day work of meeting the basic human needs of patients goes on – and I want to thank you for the care and the comfort you provide on a daily basis.

They say the measure of a society is how we treat our children and our elderly. You've heard of my commitment to improving education for the children of Mississippi. I'm here today to remind you of my commitment to the senior citizens of our state – those of you who have given so much to our society.

Last spring, we fought hard to ensure Medicaid was adequately funded, so we could continue to provide critical services like nursing homes. We fought hard for the right to restructure the program. We fought hard to make sure the 650,000 Mississippians who depend on Medicaid could count on the program to be there for them.

80 percent of the nursing home residents in Mississippi rely on Medicaid. We fought hard for them, and we fought for their families – their sons and daughters, their grandchildren – who want the very best when it comes to health care.

As part of the fight, I visited nursing homes around the state, to meet with you face-to-face about this issue. I wanted to talk with you and hear from you about Medicaid and its impact on your health care.

The time we spent together was valuable – and helped us achieve our common goals.

I asked for a reasonable appropriation for Medicaid and the flexibility to manage the program in the best interests of those who depended on it. I knew we needed to find some common ground – and in the end, we did just that.

Our work to strengthen the health care system in Mississippi is making progress, but our work isn't done yet. We're going to keep up the energy, we're going to keep up the commitment, and we're going to keep up the pressure.

The people of Mississippi deserve the very best in health care. Thank you for helping make that happen.