

Issue Brief for Congress

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Tax Benefits for Health Insurance: Current Legislation

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Tax Benefits for Health Insurance: Current Legislation

SUMMARY

The 107th Congress considered a number of new or expanded tax benefits for health insurance. Proposals considered included the creation of a refundable tax credit for all workers, the expansion and permanent extension of medical savings accounts (MSAs), the creation of tax credits for small employers, and the expansion of tax benefits for the self-employed. Proponents argue that new tax benefits are needed to extend coverage to the uninsured and to address efficiency and equity problems; opponents claim they would primarily benefit higher income taxpayers and do little for those without coverage.

Current law contains significant tax benefits for health insurance. (1) Most important is the exclusion of employer-paid health insurance from the determination of income and employment taxes. Over 2/3 of the noninstitutionalized population under age 65 are insured through employment-based insurance; on average, large employers pay about 80% of its cost, though some pay all and others none. The exclusion also applies to health insurance provided through cafeteria plans. (2) Self-employed taxpayers may deduct 70% of their health insurance payments, a proportion scheduled to rise to 100% in 2003. (3) Taxpayers who itemize deductions may deduct insurance payments to the extent they and other medical expenses exceed 7.5% of adjusted gross income. While not widely used, this deduction benefits some with employment-based insurance (for the employee share), some self-employed (the remaining 30% of their cost) and others who purchase individual market policies. (4) Workers displaced by trade can receive an advanceable, refundable tax credit to purchase

certain types of insurance. (5) Coverage under Medicare and Medicaid is not considered taxable income. (6) With some exceptions, benefits received from private or public insurance are not taxable.

By lowering the after-tax cost of insurance, the tax benefits help extend coverage to more people; they also lead insured people to obtain more coverage than otherwise. The incentives influence how coverage is acquired: the uncapped exclusion for employer-paid insurance, which can benefit nearly all workers and is easy to administer, is partly responsible for the predominance of employment-based insurance in the United States. Employment-based insurance has both advantages and disadvantages for the typical worker. The tax benefits also increase the demand for health care by enabling insured people to obtain services at discounted prices. This is one reason health care prices have risen more rapidly than the general inflation rate. Moreover, since many people would likely obtain some insurance without the tax benefits, they can be an inefficient use of public dollars. They also raise questions of equity, largely because the tax savings they generate depend upon the taxpayer's marginal tax rate. When viewed as a form of personal consumption, giving tax incentives for health insurance provides more benefits to higher income families who may not need them. Comprehensive reforms (e.g., capping the employer exclusion or replacing it with deductions and credits) might address some of these concerns, though they could be difficult to implement and may cause serious inequities of their own.

MOST RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

On August 6, 2002, President Bush signed into law the Trade Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-210). The law provides workers displaced by trade with a refundable, advanceable tax credit for the purchase of health insurance. The credit is worth 65% of the premiums paid by the displaced worker for qualified health insurance. Qualified health insurance includes continuation of coverage under COBRA, an individual insurance policy (if the worker was covered by an individual policy at least 30 days prior to becoming unemployed), and certain types of state-sponsored health insurance. Some policymakers have stated that this legislation could become a model for a tax credit for the general population.

The House-passed patient protection bill (H.R. 2563, sponsored by Representative Ganske) contained several tax provisions relating to health insurance. These provisions would have expanded and extended the use of Archer medical savings accounts (MSAs), allowed self-employed individuals to deduct 100% of their health insurance premiums, provided a tax credit for small employers, and changed the requirements for qualified health benefit purchasing coalitions. The Senate-passed patient protection bill (S. 1052) did not include these tax provisions. A conference to reconcile the bill differences was not appointed.

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

Tax Benefits in Current Law

Current law provides significant tax benefits for health insurance. The tax subsidies—for the most part federal income tax exclusions and deductions—are widely available, though not everyone can take advantage of them. They reward some people more than others, raising questions of equity. They influence the amount and type of coverage that people obtain, which affects their ability to choose doctors and other providers. In addition, the tax benefits affect the distribution and cost of health care.

Overview of Current Provisions

This section summarizes the current tax treatment of the principal ways that people obtain health insurance. It describes general rules but does not discuss all limitations, qualifications, and exceptions. An outline of the tax provisions discussed in this section is provided in **Table 1**. To understand possible effects on tax liability, readers may want to refer to the Appendix for an outline of the federal income tax formula. (For example, exclusions are items that are omitted from gross income, while deductions are subtracted from gross income in order to arrive at taxable income.) Section number references are to the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 as amended.

Table 1. Summary of the Tax Treatment of Health Insurance

Plan type	Tax treatment for individual	Tax treatment for employer
Traditional employer-sponsored plan	<p>–Premiums paid by employee are deductible if (1) employee itemizes and (2) premiums plus other unreimbursed medical expenses exceed 7.5% of adjusted gross income (AGI)</p> <p>–Premiums paid by employer are excluded for income and employment tax purposes</p> <p>–Insurance benefits excluded from employee's gross income</p>	–Employer contributions deducted as a business expense, and they are not counted for employer's share of employment taxes
Individual market policies	–Premiums are deductible if (1) the individual itemizes and (2) premiums plus other unreimbursed medical expenses exceed 7.5% of AGI	–N/A
Policies purchased by self-employed individuals	<p>–Individual can deduct premiums (up to 70% in 2002) from adjusted gross income; deduction does not have to exceed 7.5% of AGI</p> <p>–Premiums not deducted using the self-employed deduction can be deducted if (1) the individual itemizes and (2) the remaining premiums plus unreimbursed medical expenses exceed 7.5% of AGI</p>	
Cafeteria plans	–Premiums and other health benefits are excluded for income and employment tax purposes	– Employer contributions deducted as a business expense, and they are not counted for employer's share of employment taxes
Flexible spending accounts	–All contributions excluded for income and employment tax purposes	– Employer contributions deducted as a business expense, and they are not counted for employer's share of employment taxes
Medical savings accounts	<p>–Employer contributions excluded for income and employment tax purposes</p> <p>–Individual contributions deductible for income tax purposes</p> <p>–Only for self-employed individuals with high-deductible insurance or employees of a small business providing high deductible insurance</p>	– Employer contributions deducted as a business expense, and they are not counted for employer's share of employment taxes
Military and veterans health care	–Benefits and coverage provided under military and veterans health care programs are not considered taxable income	– N/A
Medicare and Medicaid	<p>–Benefits and coverage provided under the Medicare and Medicaid programs are not considered taxable income</p> <p>–Premiums paid for Medicare are deductible if (1) the individual itemizes and (2) premiums plus other unreimbursed medical expenses exceed 7.5% of AGI</p>	–N/A

Employment-Based Plans. Health insurance paid by employers generally is excluded from employees' gross income in determining their income tax liability; it also is not considered for either the employee's or the employer's share of employment taxes (i.e., social security, Medicare, and unemployment taxes). (Sections 106 and 3121, respectively) The income and employment tax exclusions apply to both single and family coverage, which includes the employee's spouse and dependents. Premiums paid by employees generally are not deductible, though they may be counted towards the itemized medical expense deduction or subject to a premium conversion arrangement under a cafeteria plan (both of which are discussed below).

Over two-thirds of the noninstitutionalized population under age 65 is insured under an employment-based plan. On average, large employers pay about 80% of the cost for employment-based insurance, though some pay all and others pay none. Employers typically pay a smaller percentage for family than for single coverage.

Insurance benefits paid from employment-based plans are excluded from gross income if they are reimbursements for medical expenses or payments for permanent physical injuries. Benefits not meeting these tests are taxable in proportion to the share of the insurance costs paid by the employer that were excluded from gross income. (Sections 104 and 105) Benefits are also taxable to the extent taxpayers received a tax benefit from claiming a deduction for the expenses in a prior year (for example, if taxpayers claimed a medical expense deduction for expenditures in 2000 and then received an insurance reimbursement in 2001). In addition, benefits received by highly-compensated employees under discriminatory self-insured plans are partly taxable. A self-insured plan is one in which the employer assumes the risk for a health care plan and does not shift it to a third party.

Employers may deduct their insurance payments as a business expense. The deduction is not a tax benefit but a calculation necessary for the proper measurement of the net income that is subject to taxation. Revenue loss attributable to this deduction is not considered a tax expenditure.

The Joint Committee on Taxation (JCT) estimates the FY2003 federal revenue loss attributable to the exclusion for employer contributions for health insurance, medical care (including that provided through cafeteria plans and flexible spending accounts, described below) and long-term care insurance will be \$75.1 billion. The estimate does not include the effect of the exclusion on employment taxes.

Medical Expense Deduction. Taxpayers who itemize their deductions may deduct unreimbursed medical expenses, but only the amount of such expenses that exceeds 7.5% of adjusted gross income (AGI). (Section 213) Medical expenses include health insurance premiums paid by the taxpayer, such as the employee's share of premiums in employment-based plans, premiums for individual private market policies, and part of the premiums paid by self-employed taxpayers. More generally, medical expenses include amounts paid for the "diagnosis, cure, mitigation, treatment, or prevention of disease, or for the purpose of affecting any structure or function of the body." They also include certain transportation and lodging expenditures, qualified long-term care service costs, and long-term care premiums that do not exceed certain amounts. Currently, the deduction is intended to help only those with catastrophic expenses.

The medical expense deduction is not widely used. For most taxpayers, the standard deduction is larger than the sum of itemized deductions; moreover, most do not have unreimbursed expenses that exceed the 7.5% AGI floor. In 1998, about 31% of all individual income tax returns had itemized deductions, and of these only about 15% (i.e., about 4.5% of all returns) claimed a medical expense deduction.

The JCT estimates the FY2003 revenue loss attributable to the medical expense deduction (including long-term care expenses) will be \$6 billion.

Individual Private Market Policies. Payments for private market health insurance purchased by individuals are a deductible medical expense, provided the taxpayer itemizes deductions and applies the 7.5% AGI floor as just described. Premiums for the following insurance, however, are not deductible: policies for loss of life, limb, sight, etc.; policies that pay guaranteed amounts each week for a stated number of weeks for hospitalization; and the part of car insurance that provides medical coverage for all persons injured in or by the policyholder's car. Benefits paid under accident and health insurance policies purchased by individuals are excluded from gross income, even if they exceed medical expenses.

About 6% of the noninstitutionalized population under age 65 is insured through these private policies. Likely purchasers include early retirees, young adults, employees without access to employment-based insurance, and the self-employed.

Self-Employed Deduction. Self-employed taxpayers may deduct payments for health insurance in determining their AGI. (Section 162) Their insurance typically is an individual private market policy. The self-employed deduction, an "above-the-line" deduction, is not restricted to itemizers, as is the medical expense deduction. Following enactment of the Omnibus Consolidated and Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 1999 (P.L. 105-277), the deduction was 60% of insurance payments in 1999 through 2001; the deduction is 70% in 2002 and will increase to 100% in 2003 and thereafter. So limited, the deduction cannot exceed the net profit and any other earned income from the business under which the plan is established, less deductions taken for certain retirement plans and for one-half the self-employment tax. It is not available for any month in which the taxpayer or the taxpayer's spouse is eligible to participate in a subsidized employment-based health plan (that is, one in which the employer pays part of the cost). These restrictions prevent taxpayers with little net income from their business (which may not be uncommon in a new business, for example, or in a part-time business that grows out of a hobby) from deducting much if any of their insurance payments. However, the portion not deductible under these rules may be treated as an itemized medical expense deduction. For additional information, see CRS Report 98-515 E, *Tax Treatment of Health Insurance Expenditures by the Self-Employed: Current Law and Selected Economic Effects*, by Gary Guenther.

Self employed individuals include sole proprietors (single owners of unincorporated businesses), general partners, limited partners who receive guaranteed payments, and individuals who receive wages from S-corporations in which they are more than 2% shareholders. (S-corporation status may be elected by corporations that meet a number of Internal Revenue Code requirements. Among other things, they cannot have more than 75 shareholders or more than one class of stock. S-corporations are tax-reporting rather than tax-paying entities, in contrast to C-corporations that are subject to the corporate income tax.)

In 1998, about 3.4 million tax returns (about 2.7% of all returns) claimed the self-employed health insurance deduction. For FY2003, the JCT estimates the revenue loss attributable to the deduction (including the deduction for long-term care insurance) to be \$2.4 billion.

Cafeteria Plans. Health benefits provided through a cafeteria plan are excludable for both income and employment tax purposes. A cafeteria plan is a written benefit plan under which employees may choose between receiving cash and certain nontaxable benefits such as health coverage or dependent care. (Cash here includes any taxable benefits.) Under an option known as a premium conversion plan, employees may elect to reduce their taxable wages in exchange for having their share of health insurance premiums paid on a pre-tax basis; the effect is the same as if employees could claim an above-the-line deduction for their payments. Starting in October, 2000, federal employees who participate in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHBP) generally can elect this option. Federal retirees may not use their annuities on a pre-tax basis for FEHBP premiums.

Nontaxable benefits provided through cafeteria plans are exempt from income and employment taxes under the Internal Revenue Code rules applicable to those benefits, such as employer-paid insurance. A separate statutory provision (Section 125) extends these exclusions to situations in which employees are given the option of receiving cash; were it not for this provision, the nontaxable benefit would be taxable since the employees had been in constructive receipt of the cash.

Flexible Spending Accounts. Benefits paid from flexible spending accounts (FSAs) are also excludable for income and employment tax purposes. FSAs and cafeteria plans are closely related, but not all cafeteria plans have FSAs and not all FSAs are part of cafeteria plans. FSAs funded through salary reductions are exempt from taxation through cafeteria plan provisions (since otherwise employees would be in constructive receipt of cash) while FSAs funded by nonelective employer contributions are exempt directly under provisions applying to employer-paid insurance. For additional information on FSAs, see CRS Report 96-500, *Flexible Spending Accounts and Medical Savings Accounts: A Comparison*, by Bob Lyke and Chris L. Peterson.

Health care FSAs must exhibit some of the risk-shifting and risk-distribution characteristics of insurance. Among other things, participants must elect a specific benefit amount prior to the start of a plan year; this election cannot be revoked except for changes in family status. The full benefit amount (less any benefits paid) must be made available throughout the entire year, even if employees spread their contributions throughout the year. Any amount unused at the end of the year must be forfeited to the employer (thus, "use it or lose it"). FSAs cannot be used to purchase insurance; however, they can be combined with premium conversion plans under cafeteria arrangements to achieve the same tax effect.

In 1997, about 40% of full-time employees in medium and large size private firms could have a health care FSA. Actual participation likely was far less.

Medical Savings Accounts. Medical savings accounts (MSAs) are personal savings accounts for unreimbursed medical expenses. They are used to pay for health care not covered by insurance, including deductibles and copayments. Currently, a limited number of MSAs may be established by individuals who have qualifying high deductible

insurance (and none other, with some exceptions) and who either are self-employed or are employees covered by a high deductible insurance plan established by their small employer (50 or fewer employees on average). The formal name of MSAs is now Archer MSAs.

Employer contributions to MSAs are excludable for both income and employment tax purposes, while individuals' contributions (allowed only if the employer does not contribute) are deductible for determining AGI. Contributions are limited to 65% of the insurance deductible for single coverage and 75% for family coverage. Account earnings are excludable as well, as are distributions used for unreimbursed medical expenses, with some exceptions. Non-qualified distributions are included in gross income and an additional 15% penalty is applied. For further information, see CRS Report 96-500, *Flexible Spending Accounts and Medical Savings Accounts: A Comparison*, by Bob Lyke and Chris L. Peterson.

The original medical savings account legislation (the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, P.L. 104-191), authorized a limited number of MSAs under a demonstration beginning in 1997. Eligibility was to be restricted after the *earlier* of (1) December 31, 2000, or (2) specified dates following a determination that the number of taxpayers with accounts exceeded certain thresholds (eventually, 750,000). Once eligibility was restricted under these tests, MSAs generally would have been limited to individuals who either were active participants (had contributions to their accounts) prior to the cut-off date or became active participants through a participating employer. The Community Renewal Tax Relief Act of 2000 (P.L. 106-554) included an extension of eligibility for new participants until December 31, 2002; it also changed the formal name to Archer MSAs for the retiring chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. The Job Creation and Worker Assistance Act (P.L. 107-147) extended eligibility for new participants until December 31, 2003.

The IRS has estimated that 62,232 MSAs received contributions in tax year 2000 and that an additional 22,640 were established prior to July 1, 2001. MSAs are not counted towards the cut-off threshold if the owners were previously uninsured; thus, not all of these can be compared to the 750,000 ceiling. MSAs should be distinguished from Medicare+Choice MSAs, which are discussed below under the tax treatment of Medicare and Medicaid.

Tax Credit for Trade-Displaced Workers. On August 6, 2002, President Bush signed into law the Trade Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-210). The law allows workers displaced by trade to receive a tax credit for purchasing insurance. The amount of the credit is equal to 65% of the premiums paid by the worker for qualified health insurance. The credit is advanceable, meaning that workers can receive the credit when purchasing insurance rather than receiving it after filing their tax returns. The credit is also refundable; eligible workers can receive the credit even if they have zero tax liability for the year. To be eligible for the credit, a worker must be (1) a recipient of a trade readjustment allowance under the Trade Act of 1974; (2) an individual who is not eligible for a trade readjustment allowance because he or she has not exhausted all rights to unemployment insurance; (3) a displaced worker whose current job pays less than the job lost to trade and who is receiving a supplemental wage allowance; or (4) an individual who is over the age of 55 and is receiving a pension benefit from the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC).

The tax credit for workers displaced by trade can be used for limited types of health insurance. The tax credit can be applied towards premiums paid to continue employer-sponsored health insurance under the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1985 (COBRA). The credit can also be used to purchase an individual health insurance policy (if the worker was covered by an individual policy at least 30 days prior to becoming unemployed) or to purchase a group policy offered through a spouse's employer. An eligible worker can use the credit to purchase various types of state-based insurance coverage, such as coverage through a state-sponsored high-risk pool, coverage through a health insurance program offered to state employees, and coverage through an arrangement between private entities and the state. State-based coverage must be guaranteed issue, cannot limit coverage due to pre-existing conditions, cannot charge higher premiums than those charged to individuals who do not receive the tax credit, and must offer the same benefits as those provided to individuals who do not receive the tax credit.

Some Democratic Members of the Senate have stated that the law was not intended to allow states to enter into agreements with private insurers offering individual coverage. Some House Republicans, however, argue that the intent of the law was to allow states to enter into agreements with private insurers, even those offering individual coverage. Some believe that this legislation could serve as a model for a tax credit for the general population.

Military and Veterans Health Care. Coverage under military and veterans health care programs is not taxable income, nor are the benefits these programs provide. The tax exclusion (Section 134) applies as well to the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services (CHAMPUS) and Tricare, which serve military dependents, retirees, and retiree dependents. In 1996, about 2.2% of the noninstitutionalized population under age 65 had military or veterans health care as their primary form of coverage. The FY2003 revenue loss attributable to CHAMPUS and Tricare is estimated to be \$1.5 billion. For more information, see CRS Issue Brief IB93103, *Military Medical Care Services: Questions and Answers*, by Richard A. Best.

Medicare and Medicaid. Coverage under Medicare or Medicaid is not taxable income. Similarly, benefits paid from either program are not subject to taxation. Medicare covers over 38 million people, including 96% of those ages 65 and older. Medicaid covers over 41 million people. The JCT estimates the revenue loss attributable to the exclusion of Medicare benefits will be \$27.1 billion in FY2002. Medicaid beneficiaries, who must meet certain categorical requirements (aged, blind, or disabled, or specified members of families with dependent children) are generally poor and unlikely to have tax liability.

The employment tax individuals pay for Medicare Part A is not a deductible medical expense. However, premiums paid by individuals who voluntarily enroll in Part A are deductible, provided the taxpayer itemizes deductions and applies the 7.5 % AGI floor as described above. (Medicare Part A is insurance for hospitalization, skilled nursing facilities, home health and hospice care. Individuals age 65 and older may voluntarily enroll in Part A if they or their spouse do not have at least 10 years of Medicare-covered employment.) Medicare Part B premiums are also deductible subject to those same limitations, as are premiums for Medigap insurance. (Medicare Part B is supplementary insurance for doctors' fees and outpatient services. Medigap insurance is private insurance that covers Medicare deductibles, co-payments, and benefits not covered under Medicare.)

Beginning in 1999, legislation allowed a limited number of Medicare beneficiaries to elect Medicare+Choice medical savings accounts instead of traditional Medicare. Contributions to these accounts (made only by the Secretary of Health and Human Services) are exempt from taxes, as are account earnings. Withdrawals are likewise not taxed nor subject to penalties if used to pay unreimbursed medical expenses, with some exceptions. No Medicare+Choice MSA plans have ever been offered.

Some Consequences of the Tax Benefits

Increases in Coverage. By lowering the after-tax cost of insurance, the tax benefits described above help extend coverage to more people. This of course is the intention: Congress has long been concerned about whether people have access to health care. The public subsidy implicit in the incentives (foregone tax revenues) usually is justified on grounds that people would otherwise under-insure, that is, delay purchasing coverage in the hope that they will not become ill or have an accident. Uninsured people are an indication of market failure; they impose spill-over costs on society in the form of public health risks and uncompensated charity care (the free-rider problem). Moreover, if insurance were purchased only by people who most need health care, its cost would become prohibitive for others (the adverse selection problem).

However, the tax benefits also lead insured people to obtain more coverage than they would otherwise choose. They purchase insurance that covers more than hospitalization and other catastrophic expenses, such as routine doctor visits, prescription drugs, and dental care. They obtain coverage with smaller deductibles and copayments. On the other hand, comprehensive coverage and lower cost-sharing are thought to lead to better preventive care and possibly long-run savings for certain medical conditions.

Source of Coverage. Tax benefits influence the way in which insurance coverage is acquired. The uncapped exclusion for employer-paid insurance, for example, which can benefit nearly all workers and is easy to administer, is partly responsible for the predominance of employment-based insurance in the United States. In contrast, restrictions on the itemized deduction allowed for individual private market insurance may be one reason why that insurance covers only 6% of the population under age 65.

Employment-based insurance carries both advantages and disadvantages for the typical worker. Generally costs are lower, and usually individual premiums do not vary by age or risk. (Thus, young and healthy workers may pay more than their actuarial risk would cost, though they are protected as they get older or need additional health care.) However, plans chosen by employers may not meet individual workers' needs (particularly if there are limited options), and changing jobs may require both new insurance and doctors.

Increase in Health Care Use and Cost. The tax benefits increase the demand for health care by enabling insured people to obtain services at discounted prices. This induced demand can be beneficial to the extent it reflects needed health care (that which society deems everyone should have) that financial constraints otherwise would have prevented. It can be wasteful to the extent it results in less essential or ineffective care. In either case, many economists argue, the additional demand is one reason why prices for health care have risen more rapidly than the general rate of inflation.

Whether insurance coverage could be encouraged without increasing the cost of health care has been a matter of debate. Comprehensive reforms that might accomplish this goal include capping the exclusion for employer-paid insurance and replacing both the exclusion and the deduction with a limited tax credit. But these changes could be difficult to implement and may create serious inequities. A 1994 Congressional Budget Office study, *The Tax Treatment of Employment-Based Health Insurance*, provides an overview of the issues and questions these approaches raise.

Many people probably would obtain some health insurance even without the tax benefits. The cost of subsidizing people for what they would otherwise do is an inefficient use of public dollars. Ideally, the tax incentives should lead to insurance being purchased only to the extent it results in better health care for society as a whole. But how they could be revised to accomplish this goal is a difficult question given the different ways insurance is provided, the various ways it is regulated, and the voluntary nature of decisions to purchase it.

Equity. Questions might be raised about the distribution of the tax incentives. Since as a practical matter they are not available to everyone, problems of horizontal equity arise. Workers without employment-based insurance generally cannot benefit from them, nor can many early retirees (people under the age of 65). Even if these individuals itemized their deductions, they can deduct health insurance premiums only to the extent that they (and other health care expenditures) exceed 7.5% of AGI. In contrast, the exclusion for employer-paid insurance is unlimited.

Even if everyone could benefit from the tax incentives, there would be questions of vertical equity. Tax savings from the exclusions and deductions described above generally are determined by taxpayers' marginal tax rate. Thus, taxpayers in the 15% tax bracket would save \$600 in income taxes from a \$4,000 exclusion (i.e., \$4,000 x 0.15) for an employer-paid premium, while taxpayers in the 36% bracket would save \$1,440 (i.e., \$4,000 x 0.36). If health insurance is considered a form of personal consumption (such as food or clothing), this pattern of benefits would strike many people as unfair. It is unlikely that a government grant program would be designed in this manner. However, to the extent that health insurance is considered a way of spreading an individual's catastrophic economic risk over multiple years, basing tax savings on marginal tax rates might be justified.

For additional information on the economics of health insurance, see CRS Report RL30762, *Tax Subsidies for Health Insurance for the Uninsured: An Economic Analysis of Selected Policy Issues for Congress*, by Gary Guenther.

Current Proposals

In the 107th Congress, a number of new or expanded tax benefits for health insurance were proposed: expanded eligibility for medical savings accounts, 100% deduction for the self-employed starting in 2002 rather than 2003, carryovers and rollovers for flexible spending accounts, and expanded (above-the-line) tax deductions or tax credits. Proponents generally argue that these changes are needed to extend coverage to the uninsured and to address efficiency and equity problems, while opponents generally argue that tax benefits are unlikely to make much difference for people who do not now purchase insurance.

This Issue Brief does not attempt to identify all bills relating to tax benefits for health insurance; rather, its focus is on bills that have been reported from committee or considered on the House or Senate floor. For a comprehensive list of bills providing tax benefits for health insurance, Congressional offices can use the Legislative Information System (LIS) available through the CRS home page [<http://www.crs.gov>].

Medical Savings Accounts

As described above, relatively few tax-advantaged Archer medical savings accounts (MSAs) have been established since they first became available in 1997. The slow growth can be attributed to a number of factors including product unfamiliarity, consumer aversion to financial risk, and the reluctance of insurance agents to sell lower-priced policies; however, statutory restrictions undoubtedly have played some role. MSA proponents are urging Congress to expand eligibility and modify restrictions on the required high deductible insurance. In their view, MSAs ought to be encouraged since they can make insurance more affordable, allow a wider choice among doctors, and protect patient rights better than government regulation. Critics generally oppose expansion, arguing that MSAs will result in adverse selection among health plans, underutilization of preventive care, and unwarranted tax breaks for high income families. (For an analysis of these and other questions, see CRS Report 96-500, *Flexible Spending Accounts and Medical Savings Accounts: A Comparison*, by Bob Lyke and Chris L. Peterson.)

The House-passed patient protection bill (H.R. 2563, Representative Ganske) would have expanded and permanently extended the authorization for MSAs. (Under current law, the authorization for new MSAs is set to expire December 31, 2003.) Effective after December 31, 2001, H.R. 2563 would have:

- ! repealed limits on the number of accounts;
- ! made active accounts generally available to anyone with qualifying high deductible insurance (thus repealing restrictions limiting them to employees of small employers and self-employed individuals);
- ! allowed contributions up to the amount of the insurance deductible (thus deleting the 65% and 75% ceilings);
- ! allowed contributions to be made both by employers and account owners;
- ! lowered minimum insurance deductibles from \$1,500 to \$1,000 for single coverage and \$3,000 to \$2,000 for family coverage (indexed from 2000);
- ! allowed MSAs to be offered through cafeteria plans;
- ! allowed the qualifying insurance not to have a deductible for preventive care, even if this is not required by state law; and
- ! allowed the qualifying insurance to have higher deductibles and out-of-pocket limits for out-of-network expenses.

Comparable changes were recommended in President Bush's FY2003 budget and were contained in H.R. 1524 (introduced by Representative Thomas, Chairman of the House Committee on Ways and Means) and S. 1067 (Senator Grassley, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Finance).

On the July 25, 2002, the House passed the Improving Access to Long-Term Care Act of 2002 (H.R. 4946, introduced by Representative Hayworth). The bill would have allowed

enrollees in Medicare+Choice MSAs to open an Archer MSA. The Medicare+Choice MSA would have qualified as a high-deductible plan for purposes of the Archer MSA. For Medicare+Choice MSA enrollees, the limit on monthly contributions to the Archer MSA would have been increased to 100% of 1/12 of the annual deductible. (For other individuals with Archer MSAs, the limit would have remained at 65% of 1/12 of the annual deductible.)

Self-Employed Deduction

The House-passed patient protection bill (H.R. 2563, Representative Ganske) would have allowed self-employed taxpayers to deduct 100% of the cost of their insurance beginning in 2002. Several similar bills were introduced in the 107th Congress.

The principal argument for increasing the deduction is equity. People who have employment-based insurance—over two-thirds of those under age 65—may exclude from their gross income the amount of insurance paid by the employer. The exclusion, which is uncapped, also applies to employment taxes. (In contrast, self-employed taxpayers may not deduct their health insurance expenditures in calculating their self-employment tax.) Equitable treatment between corporate owners and owners of unincorporated businesses would remove an incentive to choose the form of business organization merely for tax reasons. Since Congress has already decided to allow the full deduction, advancing the date it becomes available may raise only budget, not policy issues.

Nonetheless, questions might still be raised about whether a 100% deduction would be equitable. As mentioned above, large employers on average pay about 80% of the cost of the insurance they offer, leaving employees to pay the other 20% with after-tax dollars. Perhaps capping the deduction at 80% would be the equivalent, though this would not offset the employment tax exclusion. Moreover, self-employed taxpayers are owners; for the most part, they can choose whatever insurance they want, even expensive coverage. A full deduction might not lead them to be as cost-conscious as corporate owners. Finally, it is debatable whether accelerating the deduction would make it more likely that the *employees* of self-employed owners will be provided health insurance. Some argue that the deduction should not be increased unless it is coupled with a nondiscrimination requirement. The original authorization for the deduction in 1986 had such a requirement, but it was repealed in 1989, leaving the owners with tax advantages their employees do not have.

Cafeteria Plans

As mentioned above, federal employees generally may pay their FEHBP premiums on a pretax basis; however, this cannot be done by federal retirees. H.R. 2125 (Tom Davis) and S. 1022 (Warner) would have extended the benefit to federal civilian and military retirees. With respect to equity, it would seem appropriate to allow retirees as well as active workers to pay FEHBP premiums on a pretax basis, especially since retirees generally have less income. On the other hand, one might question why federal but not other retirees should have this benefit.

Flexible Spending Accounts

President Bush's FY2003 budget would have allowed up to \$500 in unused balances in health care flexible spending accounts (FSAs) to be carried over to the following year without being taxed. Under current law, unused balances must be forfeited to the employer. The proposal would have also permitted unused balances to be distributed to participants (in which case they would be taxed) or rolled over into certain qualified deferred compensation plans (section 401(k), 403(b), and 457 plans).

The principal argument for allowing these options is that taxpayers might be more willing to participate in FSAs if unused balances at the end of the year were not lost. Allowing carryovers or rollovers might also discourage participants from spending remaining balances carelessly, just to use them up. FSAs generally do not restrict patients' choice of doctors; thus, some might favor them as a way around limitations of managed care.

However, the options might result in tax breaks that are unwarranted, particularly for higher income families. Some participants might increase their FSA contributions just to take advantage of them. The health care FSA carryover could become another form of MSA, though limited in size and without account earnings that accrue to the employee. It is not clear in the President's proposal when rollovers to deferred compensation plans would occur; employers generally would need time to run nondiscrimination tests to see if additional contributions to these plans would be permissible.

Expanded Tax Deduction

Two bills were introduced in the 107th Congress that would have allowed individuals to deduct 100% of their insurance premiums, regardless of whether they itemize (H.R. 1127, introduced by Representative Stearns, and H.R. 4801, introduced by Representative Chabot). An expanded tax deduction would improve horizontal equity since more taxpayers could receive tax benefits similar to those associated with employer-paid coverage. (An above-the-line deduction has the same income tax effect as the exclusion allowed that coverage.) As discussed above, the deduction allowed under current law is restricted to taxpayers who itemize and is further limited to insurance and medical costs that exceed 7.5% adjusted gross income; thus, most taxpayers cannot benefit from it.

At the same time, an expanded deduction would not improve vertical equity since the tax benefits generally would be proportional to the taxpayer's marginal tax rate. A \$2,000 premium would result in tax savings of \$720 for someone in the 36% bracket (i.e., \$2,000 x 0.36) but only \$300 for someone in the 15% bracket (i.e., \$2,000 x 0.15). It might also be doubted whether tax savings of 15% would enable more lower income taxpayers to obtain insurance.

Tax Credit

President Bush's FY2003 budget included a refundable tax credit for health insurance for individuals under age 65. For low-income taxpayers, the credit would have equaled 90% of the premium and would be decreased for higher incomes; the credit would have been phased out at \$30,000 for individuals and at \$60,000 for families. The amount of the credit

would have been limited to \$1,000 for an adult covered by a policy and \$500 for each child, up to two children. Individuals participating in public health plans (such as Medicaid or the State Children's Health Insurance Program) or employer health plans would not have been eligible for the credit. The credit could have been claimed through the normal tax-filing process. Alternatively, beginning July 1, 2003, an individual could have used the credit in advance to reduce payments to the insurance company. The insurer would have then received the credit directly from the U.S. Treasury.

A tax credit could be attractive in several respects. If it were generally available, a credit could aid taxpayers who do not have access to employment-based insurance (or who are dissatisfied with it) and who cannot claim the medical expense deduction. A credit could provide all taxpayers with the same dollar reduction in final tax liability; this would avoid problems of vertical equity associated with the tax exclusion and tax deduction. A credit might also provide lower income taxpayers with greater tax savings than either the exclusion or the deduction; this might reduce the number of the uninsured. If the credit were refundable, it could even help taxpayers with limited or no tax liability.

But the effects of tax credits can vary widely, depending on how they are designed. One important question is whether the credit would supplement or replace existing tax benefits, particularly the exclusion for employer-paid insurance. Another is whether the credit would be the same for all taxpayers or more generous for those with lower incomes. Ensuring that lower income families benefit from any credit may be difficult if they cannot afford to purchase insurance beforehand. Similarly, it might be asked whether the credit would vary with factors that affect the cost of health insurance, such as age, gender, place of residence, or health status. Whether the insurance must meet certain standards for benefits, coinsurance, and underwriting might also be a factor. For additional analysis, see CRS Report RL30762, *Tax Subsidies for Health Insurance for the Uninsured: An Economic Analysis of Selected Policy Issues for Congress*, by Gary Guenther.

Small Employer Tax Credit

The House-passed patient protection bill (H.R. 2563, Representative Ganske) would have authorized a tax credit for small employers (on average 2 to 50 employees) that previously had not offered coverage, limited to the first 48 months. The basic credit would have equaled 20% of the cost of coverage (or 30% if it were obtained through a small business purchasing pool) not exceeding \$2,000 for individuals and \$5,000 for families.

The Health Insurance Access Act of 2002 (S. 2679, Senators Baucus and Gordon Smith) would have provided a tax credit for employers with fewer than 50 employees. The tax credit would have equaled 50% of the cost of coverage for firms with fewer than 25 employees, 40% of the cost of coverage for firms with 26 to 35 employees, and 30% of the cost of coverage for firms with 36 to 50 employees. To qualify for the credit, a firm that did not previously offer coverage would have needed to contribute at least 50% towards the premium for the first five years of the program. Firms offering new coverage after the first five years of the program and firms currently offering coverage would have needed to contribute at least 70% (for an individual policy) or 60% (for a family policy) towards the premium to qualify for the tax credit.

Foundation Grants and Loans

The Internal Revenue Code imposes excise taxes on private foundations that fail to make timely distributions of income for qualifying charitable purposes. The House-passed patient protection bill (H.R. 2563, Representative Ganske) would have provided that distributions to a qualified health benefit purchasing coalition would meet this test as long as the coalition did not use the distributions to purchase real property, to pay or provide benefits to coalition members (including employees and affiliates), or to pay for expenses more than 48 months after the coalition was established. Under the bill, a qualified health benefit purchasing coalition would have been defined as a private not-for-profit corporation that sells health insurance through state licensed issuers to small employers and meets a number of other tests.

LEGISLATION

S. 1022 (Warner) / H.R. 2125 (Davis)

A bill to allow Federal civilian and military retirees to pay health insurance premiums on a pretax basis and to allow a deduction for TRICARE supplemental premiums. Introduced June 12, 2001. Referred to the Committee on Finance (S. 1022) and the Committee on Ways and Means (H.R. 2125).

S. 1067 (Grassley) / H.R. 1524 (Thomas)

Medical Savings Account Availability Act of 2001. H.R. 1524 introduced April 4, 2001 and referred to the Committee on Ways and Means. S. 1067 introduced June 20, 2001 and referred to the Committee on Finance.

H.R. 1127 (Stearns)

Health Care Tax Deduction Act of 2001. Introduced March 20, 2001. Referred to the Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Health.

H.R. 2563 (Ganske)

Bipartisan Patient Protection Act. Introduced July 19, 2001. Passed by the House August 2, 2001. Placed on the Senate Legislative Calendar.

S. 2679 (Baucus)

Health Insurance Access Act of 2002. Introduced June 25, 2002. Referred to the Committee on Finance.

H.R. 4946 (Hayworth)

Improving Access to Long-Term Care Act of 2002. Introduced June 17, 2002. Reported by the Committee on Ways and Means June 19, 2002. Passed by the House July 25, 2002.

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Appendix

Listed below is the general formula for calculating federal income taxes. The list omits some steps, such as prepayments (from withholding and estimated payments) and the alternative minimum tax.

1. Gross income
2. *minus* Deductions (or adjustments) for AGI (i.e., “above the line”)
3. = Adjusted gross income (AGI)
4. *minus* Greater of standard or itemized deductions
5. *minus* Personal and dependency exemptions
6. = Taxable income
7. *times* Tax rate
8. = Tax on taxable income (“regular tax liability”)
9. *minus* Credits
10. = Final tax liability