MENTAL HEALTH AMENDMENT

Mr. SHELBY. Mr. President, I am extremely gratified that the Senate has unanimously approved the Health Insurance Reform Act, S. 1028, with the inclusion of Senator DOMENICI's amendment relating to mental health coverage. Specifically, this amendment prevents insurers from imposing limits on benefits for mental illness that are not imposed on benefits for physical illness. This bill requires insurers to treat consumers fairly. It guarantees that insurers do not drop people's coverage when they change jobs or for preexisting health conditions. It also prevents insurers from imposing arbitrary coverage limits on persons who need services for mental illness.

I have long been a strong supporter of nondiscriminatory coverage for persons suffering mental illness. In the last Congress, I sponsored, with Senators DOLE and SIMON, a resolution, Senate Concurrent Resolution 16, that called on Congress to ensure that persons with mental illness receive equitable coverage with that afforded for physical illness. Our resolution received strong bipartisan support, and the Senate has included nondiscriminatory coverage for mental illness in S. 1028.

Americans with mental illness deserve to have equitable access to health coverage. Because these Americans often cannot find adequate coverage under private coverage, they are frequently forced to resort to coverage in public programs. Without jobs and coverage, many are not adequately treated. This legislation will permit many mentally ill persons to have the coverage they need to hold down jobs and to lead productive and fulfilling lives.

Mr. President, it is no secret that mental illness can strike at any time, to anyone. Many of us know someone who has suffered mental illness. This amendment will provide nondiscriminatory coverage for a range of mentally ill disorders, including schizophrenia, manic depressive disorder, or panic disorder.

I believe that this amendment will make for a more productive and efficient work force. American businesses lose more than $100 billion per year due to lost productivity of employees because of substance abuse and mental illness. We can reduce this drain on employers by permitting employees access to nondiscriminatory mental illness coverage.

I strongly support S. 1028 with inclusion of nondiscriminatory coverage for persons with mental illness. Inclusion of this provision is not only the right and compassionate thing to do, but it will also reduce overall mental health spending and make our health system more accessible for persons with mental illness. I urge my fellow Senators to support this provision in conference.

CENTRIST COALITION BUDGET PLAN

Mr. SIMPSON. Mr. President, I am very pleased to join Senators CHAFEE and BREAUX and the rest of the Centrist Coalition in announcing this bipartisan proposal for a balanced budget. This is a comprehensive plan that confronts our budget problems head on. I encourage all of my colleagues to take a serious look at it.

I am particularly pleased that our plan partially corrects the inaccuracy of the Consumer Price Index [CPI]. What we propose is to reduce the CPI by one-half of a percentage point in 1997 and 1998—and by three-tenths of a percentage point thereafter—for purposes of computing cost of living adjustments [COLA's] and for indexing the Tax Code.

While the AARP and other seniors groups will shriek and wail to the high heavens about this being some backdoor effort to cut Social Security benefits, that is not what is driving this issue. What we are striving to do is to have a more accurate CPI that reflects the true level of inflation.

Last year, the Senate Finance Committee heard compelling testimony from Alan Greenspan, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, and others who believe the CPI may be off the mark by as much as two percentage points. A commission appointed by the Finance Committee issued an interim report which estimates the CPI to be overstated in the range of 0.7 to 2.0 percentage points.

The Coalition has selected the figure of 0.5 percentage points—which is a conservative estimate of how much the CPI is overstated—precisely because we want to avoid any perception that we are being unfair or unduly harsh. This modest step achieves $110 billion in savings over 7 years. This is not a popular proposal, but it is understood by us as a critically important component of our plan.

Before I discuss other elements of our plan, let me join my colleagues in underscoring the importance of our product being received as a total package. Any balanced budget plan will have elements that we do not like. But we will all have to accept some of the undesirable in order not to lose all that is so necessary.

Accordingly, this bipartisan budget plan also includes some very appropriate first steps toward slowing the growth of Medicare spending. These reforms would achieve $154 billion in savings over 7 years. From a long-term perspective, the most important reform is a provision that would conform the Medicare eligibility age with the Social Security retirement age. By gradually increasing the eligibility age to 67, this plan acknowledges that life expectancies are certainly higher now than when Medicare was first enacted in 1965.

We also impose an affluence test on Medicare Part B premiums, beginning with individual seniors who have annual incomes exceeding $50,000 and couples who have incomes exceeding $75,000. I personally believe we should begin this affluence test at much lower income thresholds, but I realize that we simply do not have the votes to do that at this time.

The Coalition plan also limits the future growth of Medicaid spending, saving $62 billion over 7 years. While our plan does not give the States as much flexibility as I would like to give them, I am willing to swallow these Medicaid reforms in the context of this comprehensive budget package, even though I might not be able to support them if they were to be considered separately in isolation from the broader package. I am absolutely convinced that the positive aspects of the total package are so critically important that they overwhelmingly outweigh certain concerns I have about the Medicaid provisions.

On another front, our plan also calls for meaningful welfare reforms, including tough work requirements for welfare recipients and a 5-year time limit on cash assistance. At the same time, we include additional funds for child care assistance—thereby recognizing the importance of child care in helping recipients make the transition from welfare to self-sufficiency. Overall, these welfare reforms achieve another $45 billion in savings.

In the area of taxes, many of us had to bite the bullet—and hard—on specific issues in order to reach consensus on the broad package. What we have here is a tax package that provides $130 billion in tax cuts. On the child tax credits, I have a personal concern about just giving away $250 for every child under the age of 17. But in the spirit of cooperation and consensus, we were able to address some of my objections by offering a real savings incentive if parents contribute $500 toward an individual retirement account established in the child's name.

The tax package has something for everyone to like—and to dislike. I urge my colleagues to look at this package in its entirety. If we start picking it apart, the package will fail and the Coalition that worked so hard to bring this all together will collapse. This plan brings us to the goal we have all been working so hard to achieve—a balanced budget and tax cut package that ends deficit spending by the year 2002.

Again, I urge all of my colleagues to consider this plan. Those who automatically reject the notion of a bipartisan budget will have no trouble finding one or two reasons to oppose it. But I am convinced that anyone who approaches this plan with an open mind—and a recognition that bipartisanship always requires some degree of compromise—will conclude that this is an impressive plan. It does not rely on gimmickry or smoke and mirrors. Instead, it makes the tough, politically unpopular decisions that Republicans and Democrats alike have been putting off for too long. It deserves our earnest support.

Several Senators addressed the Chair.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Nevada.

Mr. MURKOWSKI. Parliamentary inquiry, Mr. President.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Does the Senator yield for an inquiry?

Mr. BRYAN. I yield for an inquiry, but I do not lose the floor; is that correct?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. That is correct.

Mr. MURKOWSKI. I thought it was customary that we went back and forth in a manner that is traditional with the Senate. I have seen this occur from time to time. All I can ask the Chair is to recognize and view the entire Chamber, because the Senator from Alaska had been advised to be here at 9:50. The Senator from Alaska was here and was not recognized, even though the Senator had been standing up.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. It is the Chair's understanding of the rules of the U.S. Senate, the Chair is to recognize the Member who first addresses the Chair. In this case——

Mr. MURKOWSKI. The Senator from Alaska addressed the Chair in a timely manner.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. If the Senator will suspend——

Mr. MURKOWSKI. Well, I am very disappointed. If the Chair——

The PRESIDING OFFICER. If the Senator will suspend, the Chair will finish the statement. It is the Chair's understanding of the rules of the U.S. Senate the Chair is to recognize the first Member who addresses the Chair.

It was the Chair's opinion, and still is the Chair's opinion, that the first Member clearly to address the Chair was the Senator from Nevada. The Chair, therefore, recognized the Senator from Nevada.

Further, it is the understanding of this Chair that there is no rule in the U.S. Senate that provides for alternating back and forth. That can be accommodated between the Members themselves, but it cannot be done by the Chair. The Chair has no authority to do that. The Senator from Nevada has the floor.

Mr. BRYAN. I would like to accommodate——

The PRESIDING OFFICER. If the Senator will yield.

Mr. BRYAN. I would like to accommodate. I think the Senator from Alaska and I both have had time set aside during the morning business. I had time and I know he had time. It is going to require unanimous consent that time be extended. I will offer to extend time for him as well.

EXTENSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. BRYAN. I ask unanimous consent that morning business be extended for a period of 20 minutes, so I might be accommodated for my 10 minutes and the distinguished Senator from Alaska may be accommodated for his 10 minutes.

Mr. SIMPSON. Mr. President, I shall not object. I do not think there is any need for all this activity, and I have the greatest respect. I am supposed to be up at 10 o'clock. So I am not going to lose any sleep on that. Let us proceed and then we will go to the regular order. Senator MURKOWSKI can have 5 minutes and certainly Senator BRYAN. There is no rule in the U.S. Senate in morning business, in any sense, that there be an accommodation on both sides. That is not morning business. It is the first one present and the first one seeking recognition. Really, I hope there will not be any acrimony with regard to that decision.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. COATS). Is there objection to the request? If not, it is so ordered. The time is extended for 20 minutes. The Senator from Nevada still has the floor.

Mr. BRYAN. I thank the Chair.

TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF CHERNOBYL ACCIDENT

Mr. BRYAN. Mr. President, tomorrow, April 26, is the 10th anniversary of the most dramatic ecological disaster of the 20th century—the explosion of reactor No. 4 at the V.I. Lenin Atomic Power Plant in Chernobyl, Ukraine.

On that day, 10 years ago tomorrow, a combination of poor design, human error—or, more accurately, human negligence and incompetence—led to a massive explosion within the core of reactor No. 4—an explosion that blew off the 2,000-ton reactor chamber roof, spewing massive amounts of radiation into the surrounding area and the Earth's atmosphere in a radioactive cloud that eventually reached as far away as California.

It was not until several years after the disaster occurred that the truth about Chernobyl, the crown jewel of the Soviet nuclear power industry, began to emerge—that following the explosion, reactor No. 4 experienced what has long been considered the worst-case scenario in nuclear power—a full reactor meltdown. The core material burned, exposed to the atmosphere, for nearly 10 days, and resulting in a total meltdown.

Our colleague, Senator KENNEDY, summed it up shortly after the disaster, when he said ''The ultimate lesson of Chernobyl is that human and technological error can cause disaster anytime, anywhere.'' That has particular residence for us in Nevada.

The ecological and economic consequences of Chernobyl were massive, immediate, and will last for tens of thousands of years.

Thirty-one people died as an immediate result of the explosion, 200 were hospitalized, and 135,000 were evacuated from 71 nearby towns and villages. High doses of radiation spread over at least 10,000 square miles, affecting 5 million people in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. The explosion spread more than 200 times the radiation released by the Hiroshima and Nagasaki blasts combined. Anywhere from 32,000 to 150,000 people could eventually die as a result of the blast. Millions of people have had their lives permanently disrupted by the accident. Belarus and Ukraine now report a broad rise in respiratory illness, heart disease, and birth defects. Scientists are still waiting to see what the role may be of the radiation exposure in leading to the many cancers that take longer than 10 years to develop, but expect it to be significant.

The children of Belarus have been particularly hard hit. Seventy percent of the Chernobyl fallout landed in Belarus—a nation that itself has no nuclear reactors. Huge tracts of land in Belarus were contaminated with radioactive cesium, strontium, and plutonium. Prior to 1986, Belarus's thyroid cancer rate for children under 14 was typical—2 cases in a nation of about 10 million. By 1992, the rate was up to 66, and by 1994, the rate had increased to 82—an increase that can only be explained by the Chernobyl fallout.

One quarter of the land of Belarus, home to one-fifth of the nation's population, has been severely contaminated by the Chernobyl explosion.

The power plant complex is surrounded by an 18-mile radius exclusion zone—an area of very high contamination that is off-limits to for residence and entry without a special permit.

Lying outside of the exclusion zone is a much larger area with lesser, but still very high, contamination. Despite official government pronouncements that this area is unsafe, it is still home to 237,000 residents of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, who simply cannot afford to live anywhere else.

The remains of reactor No. 4, still highly radioactive, are contained in a hastily erected sarcophagus—a highly unstable structure, considered by many the most dangerous building on earth. As concerns regarding the possibility of collapse of the sarcophagus or the reactor entombed inside increase, it is unclear if the technological or financial challenges of stabilizing and cleaning up reactor No. 4 can ever be met.

Mr. President, If Chernobyl has taught us anything, it is that when dealing with such high-risk matters as nuclear power, or nuclear waste, small mistakes can have enormous consequences.

Next week, the Senate may turn to a bill aptly dubbed the ''Mobile Chernobyl Bill''—S. 1271, the Craig nuclear waste bill.

As many of my colleagues are aware, this establishes, on an accelerated schedule, a so-called interim high-level nuclear waste dump in Nevada.

I want to be clear on what this interim storage program means. Tens of thousands of tons of high-level nuclear waste will be removed from reactors, loaded on over 16,000 trains and trucks, and shipped cross country to Nevada, a State with no nuclear power. The