

Testimony before the
Joint Committees on Health Care, Insurance, and Ways and Means on
HB. 4444 – For an Initiative Amendment to the Constitution Relative to the
Provision of Health Insurance

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Good Morning. My name is Dr. Peter Slavin and I am President of the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

On behalf of our physicians, nurses, other health professionals, and the patients we serve each day, it is my privilege -- indeed, my obligation -- to testify before you today to strongly endorse the goal of access to health insurance for needed medical care for every child, adult and family in Massachusetts.

The great senior Senator from Massachusetts, and a true national champion of access to care -- Senator Ted Kennedy --- has called the lack of affordable access to health care one of the greatest injustices of our time. Every other industrialized nation in the world has solved this problem. I personally find it an embarrassment that the richest nation in the history of the world has been unable to do so.

42 million Americans ---and nearly 600,000 residents of Massachusetts -- lack access to quality, affordable health care because they have no health insurance. And most of these uninsured residents have full-time jobs.

The problem of the uninsured is bad for two major reasons:

First, it is clearly bad for the health of the uninsured. Numerous studies have shown that the uninsured with chronic diseases do worse than their insured counterparts.

For example:

Every year, 300,000 children with asthma are never treated by a doctor.

Uninsured women diagnosed with breast cancer are 50% more likely to die from the disease, because their cancer is diagnosed too late.

32,000 Americans with heart disease will not have access to treatments that could save their lives.

Secondly, caring for the growing number of uninsured is bad for the financial health of health care providers across the state.

At the MGH alone, we are the 3rd largest provider of free care in the Commonwealth.

At MGH, we saw our costs associated with the care of the uninsured increase by 46% last year (from \$28M in FY 02 to \$41 M in FY 03).

This year, we are seeing another significant increase in patients coming through our doors who lack any health insurance coverage.

Given the tenuous state of hospital and physician finances in the state, I am concerned that these trends and losses of this magnitude will force more hospitals out of business and drive more physicians to other states.

Some say that we cannot afford the cost of covering the uninsured. But we are already paying for the much higher costs of failing to provide health care to those who need it.

The struggle for affordable health care for all will never be easy – but to solve this problem, we must commit to work together to identify and build solutions.

The measure before you today does not endorse a specific plan to cover the uninsured, but it states unequivocally that universal access to health care is our goal.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to working with you in the future to provide quality, dignity and access to care for everyone in Massachusetts.