

Jindal: Health care should be left to patients, doctors

By Jan Moller
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BATON ROUGE — Louisiana's efforts to improve health-care outcomes must put more power in the hands of doctors and patients and should also include

broad public health measures, such as improving nutrition and boosting physical education requirements in schools, Gov. Bobby Jindal said Wednesday.

"It really is looking at health, not just health care," Jindal said, citing Louisiana's higher rates of diabetes, obesity and asthma as chronic conditions that can be improved through a sharper focus on public health.

"There's so much more that we can be doing to improve the health of our people, even apart from the efforts that are happening within DHH."

Without providing specifics, Jindal said he would favor legislation to encourage more physical education in schools and improve nutrition in school vending machines and lunches.

While health care has mostly taken a back seat during Jindal's first nine months in office, the administration is weeks away from unveiling a sweeping overhaul of the \$7.5 billion-a-year Medicaid program for the poor, elderly and disabled. The plan, dubbed Louisiana Health First, would turn over large chunks of the program to privately run managed-care organizations, which would oversee the health care of as many as 380,000 residents, mainly children.

State legislators are expected to get their first extended look at the plan in the coming weeks. If they give their approval, it will be sent to Washington, where the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services must sign off on any major changes to the Medicaid program.

Jindal said he hopes to get

the changes approved before the Bush administration leaves office Jan. 20, as the change to a new president could delay the state's plans.

"We simply don't want to start over from scratch," Jindal said.

Jindal's comments came on a day when former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich visited Baton Rouge to give a speech commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Pennington Biomedical Research Center and give a pep talk to members of the governor's cabinet and staff.

Gingrich is an advocate for free-market health-care reform, and has formed a for-profit policy organization, the Center for Health Transformation, to spread his ideas.

Gingrich said a key to reform is making all health-care records electronic and portable and suggested that taxpayers should pay for doctors and hos-

pitals to make the switch from paper records. He declined to give a cost estimate but said the federal government would eventually save money by improving its ability to detect fraud in Medicare.

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