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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

March 23, 1994

REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY  
AT HEALTHRIGHT BRIEFING

MRS. CLINTON: I want to thank the speaker and majority leader and all of the members in Congress who are here. Maybe we should have those who are present stand up so that we can see how much interest there is in our members of Congress in this important issue. (Applause.)

We are so grateful to Healthright. And I am particularly grateful to Dr. Fleming. I was reading something about him last night. And it just emphasized what he has done with those 89 years of life that he's had so far, being an advocate for people, being a voice for people who would not otherwise be heard.

And all during the last year as we have worked on a health care reform proposal, he has been with us every step of the way. I cannot tell you how many meetings he came to, meetings he convened so that we would have the benefit of his wisdom and experience. And I am personally very grateful for Dr. Fleming. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

There is very little that I or anyone can add to what we have already heard and what you will hear during the rest of this hearing. But these are the stories and the faces that I have been privileged to hear and to see all over this country for more -- where I have heard the stories that you have heard. I have spoken to the faces of wives who cared for husbands. And I have sat with husbands who have cared for wives. I have talked with children who have cared for parents and aunts and uncles. And I have talked to parents and grandparents who have cared for disabled and chronically ill children.

And every time I have the honor of hearing these

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stories, I think to myself, "There but for the grace of God go I." How grateful we should be, those of us who have our (inaudible), that we not only have it, but that we can use it to help others.

And this health care reform effort is so important for all of us. None of us knows whether we will be sick. None of us knows today whether we will be in an accident. None of us knows what our later years will bring in the way of challenges because of illness. And so we need -- those of us who are healthy -- to help those who are not, those of us who are strong to help those who need help.

And what we are trying to do in the President's approach to health care reform is really very simple. It is to guarantee private health insurance to every American that can never be taken away, can never be changed, can never be cut, can never be reduced, can never be snatched away when you need it the most.

And we want to outlaw the insurance practices that discriminate against people with a pre-existing condition, like your daughter, who when she needs help most, is told she no longer has it. And we want to eliminate lifetime limits so that when you need your insurance the most and you have to spend the money that you have invested in your insurance to take care of you, you are not told, "Sorry. The money has run out."

And we want to end discrimination against older people. We want to eliminate all of those unclear insurance practices. And we want to preserve your right to choose your doctor and your hospital, something that is being taken away every day today by insurance companies and employees. And we want to guarantee health care at the workplace where most of us who are insured receive it. And finally, we want to preserve and improve Medicare.

And if I've traveled all over this country, what I hear most from older Americans is that they need help with prescription drugs. When I think of all the medication that is being taken in order that older Americans can keep functioning, I know that every week older Americans face choices between food and prescription drugs. I know that every day older Americans look at that vial of pills. And they say to themselves, "Well, it says take four a day. But if I only take one a day, I can make it last longer."

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And I know that many older Americans end up back in the hospital because they could not afford to take the medication that had been prescribed for them. We also have to address the issue that you are here on today. We have to begin providing options for long term care that include home health care, that include community-based health care.

I was privileged to be in Florida with my husband on Monday. And I pulled from the nearly 1 million letters I had received two from citizens who had written to me last year asking that we please consider including long-term care, particularly home health care. And I was honored to introduce a woman who had taken care of her 90 year-old mother and a man who had taken care of his wife whose daughter quit her job to come home and help, thereby losing her own health insurance.

It makes no sense. It makes no moral or ethical or human or economic sense not to provide people with the support and assistance they need to take care of their own family. I thought we believed in family values in America. Well, we sure haven't acted like it. We have given too many of our older Americans and their families only one choice, spend your life savings or spend yourself into poverty and then go into a nursing home. I say it's time to support families to be able to take care of there own relatives at home. (Applause.)

We are going to need your help to fight for long-term care and prescription drugs for seniors. We're going to need you to tell your stories over and over again and for the millions who you represent, to show up at every town meeting where your member of Congress appears, to get on the radio talk shows, to write letters to the editor, to make sure that everybody knows what you know firsthand and to remind people that you can be the richest healthiest person in America today. But you don't know what will happen to you tomorrow.

And every one of us deserves to have this available. Several of you have said as I came in -- Dr. Fleming grabbed my hand. He said, "We're thinking about you and the President. And we're praying for you." Well, I want you to know that the President and I are thinking and praying for all of us, that what we have before us is a historic challenge to do right.

And what we will get done this year, in this

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Congress, with your help, with your prayers, with your advocacy, is remedying some of the failures of the most wonderful health care system in the world, but one which needs to be made better for all of us. Thank you so much. (Applause.)

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REMARKS OF THE FIRST LADY  
HEALTH RIGHT - HEALTH OF THE UNION II  
CAPITOL HILL

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you so much. I want to thank the Speaker and the Majority Leader and all of the members of Congress who are here. Maybe we should have those who are present stand up so you can see how much interest there is among members of Congress in this important issue.

We are so grateful to Health Right. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Fleming. I was reading something about him last night, and it just emphasized what he has done with those 89 years of life that he's had so far being an advocate for people, being a voice for people who would not otherwise be heard.

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There is very little that I or anyone can add to what you have already heard and what you will hear during the rest of this hearing, but these are the stories and the faces that I have been privileged to hear and to see all over this country for more than a year.

I have been in so many settings, hospitals and businesses and homes, where I have heard the stories that you have heard. I have looked into the faces of wives who have cared for husbands and I have sat with husbands who have cared for wives.

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to be made better for all of us. Thank you so much.

CONGRESSMAN GEPHARDT: Talk about being redundant, how would you like to follow that? When the history of this period is written, it will be said that the American people passed national health care reform and it happened because the American people wanted it, and because the Congress was able to enact it and come to a consensus, but, most importantly, it will be said it happened because we had a president and a First Lady who led us to make it happen.

CONGRESSMAN GEPHARDT: What you are hearing today are the stories of people. This debate is often said to be about numbers, statistics, plans, legislation, words on paper, ideas, even ideologies. But as you're hearing today, it's really not about any of that. It's simply about people, problems of people, challenges that individual people and families face on a daily basis.

People like two citizens from my district who are here today, and I want to recognize them first. Katherine Fisher is a 90-year-old resident in my district who is in the beautiful green dress, probably for St. Patrick's Day. She's still celebrating. Her daughter is Sister Mary Amelda. Sister, would you raise your hand? She's right back over here.

They are together facing a severe challenge in their life. Katherine is afflicted at her very wonderful age of 90 with a number of physical conditions that it's very hard for them to face. They are trying to do it at home because they only have Medicare for Katherine. They do not have the financial ability to add to Medicare with other polices, long-term care polices.

They do not have the option of getting home health care more than about once a month, as I understand it. Now they're facing the need to even use all of their savings, their lifetime savings, so that Katherine can be properly cared for. I'm told they are even facing the prospect of selling the one asset they have left, their home, so that they can face the medical needs and the medical challenges that are in front of them. It's a story of hope, but it's a story of challenge.

Sixty years ago, this country made a decision that when people got to be a little older that they would have enough assets, enough money, to take care of themselves and

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to stay alive. We passed Social Security. With the leadership of Franklin Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt, the American people reached a consensus. We made sure that everyone would have enough money after they retired so that they could live a decent life.

In the middle 60s, 30 years ago, we knew that over half of the elderly people in our country did not have the money to see a doctor when they needed to see a doctor. With the leadership of President Johnson, Lady Bird Johnson, Arthur Fleming and others, the Congress came to a decision and Tom Foley was a brand new member of the Congress at that point and voted with the majority of both parties in the Congress to pass the Medicare program. The problems we're discussing today, we can even have a chance to discuss because we passed Medicare.

People's lives have been extended wonderfully because of the Medicare program, but Medicare is now unable to meet the challenges that we face today of extended age. We don't have prescription drugs in the Medicare program. We don't have long-term care in the Medicare program. So what we're discussing today is the next big wave of health care reform to address the problems of today: to enhance the Medicare program to meet our success in having passed the Medicare program.

Now, the reason it takes us so long to do these things is that we're a democracy. We don't have a benevolent king that can just say it's decreed that this should happen. We have to get the agreement of the people through their representatives to do it; 218 in the House, 51 in the Senate. Then the president can sign the bill. We are on the threshold of reaching that consensus today, but it will not happen automatically. It will not happen easily. It never does.

We have to fight for what's right, as the First Lady said. The forces that are against this have always been there, or they were there in 1935 and they were there in 1965. They said this is socialism, it's communism, it's bad for the American people. All the special interests who were arrayed today against us were arrayed against us in 1935 and in 1965.

But I believe with all my heart, because of you and people like you who want this to happen that the people will prevail right will prevail, and with your persistent cooperation and help in doing this, we'll make it happen in

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1994.

CONGRESSMAN BONYER: My name is David Bonyer from the State of Michigan. I'm the House Majority Whip. I want to thank Arthur Fleming and Health Right for coming to Washington, for providing us with stories that we need to act upon the legislation that we have been talking about this morning.

Dr. Fleming has called Claude Pepper the patron saint of older Americans, and rightly so. But if Claude Pepper is the patron saint of older Americans, I think Dr. Fleming is the patron bishop. We thank him so much for all he's done.

CONGRESSMAN BONYER: He has carried on Claude Pepper's legacy in his fight for justice and the good life for the American people in the best possible way. I also want to thank and commend the First Lady for her outstanding leadership on this issue, her persistence, her courage and her fight. Without her, we wouldn't be this far. We want to recognize her contribution to this battle.

When health care was first proposed 50 years ago, most of the 51 Americans who are here who are going to talk to us this morning were in bobby socks or they were wearing letterman sweaters. It took us 50 years to get to this point where we will deliver. It is because the president and the First Lady have decided, finally, that we will put every effort we possibly can. We will use every chip we possibly can. We will make the supreme effort to get this done. They deserve a lot of credit.

I also want to echo something that Dick Gephardt, and the Speaker, and the First Lady, and Dr. Fleming said. This isn't just about process. It isn't about numbers. It isn't about statistics of formulas. It's about real people. It's about the stories we have just heard. Sometimes people say well, you know, there is no health care crisis in America. We don't have health care crises. We don't need to cover long-term care, or we can't afford to cover prescription drugs. Well, tell that to the people that are here. Tell that to the American people who know there is a crisis, 100,000 people losing insurance every month in this country.

When FDR first proposed Social Security, as the majority leader just said, in 1934, he called it a sacred trust between the government and its people. In 1964, the

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Medicare program was labeled a sacred trust between its government and its people. This bill, this legislation must also be a sacred trust between the government and its people.

The bill we pass must embody all the principles and all the programs that the First Lady so well enunciated just a second ago. It must include coverage so that when you get sick, you're cared for; when you need medicine, you get cared for; when you want to be home instead of the hospital, you can be there without worrying about being bankrupt.

So with your help, the dream that Truman had and Roosevelt had in the 1940s, over 50 years ago, will become a reality. We need everybody in this room who is interested in making this happen to engage yourself personally, as Dick Gephardt just mentioned. That means phone calls, that means letters, that means visits. Everybody in this room can do something.

I'll leave you with one short story. Several weeks ago, we had an amendment that adopted to an education bill. I won't talk about its substance. I want to talk basically just the process for a second. This amendment came out of the Education and Labor Committee. When the group that was concerned about this amendment found out about it, they flooded the switch boards in Washington, D.C., with phone calls. I received 1,000 calls in my office in two days. One member of Congress received 10,000 phone calls, tied up everything, couldn't get any business done. But we knew what the issue was and we knew what the people wanted.

When that bill hit the floor, that amendment was reversed. We need that same type of intensity, passion on this issue in order to make this a reality. As others have said, this will be one of the most difficult fights that any of us have ever engaged in as we march toward the day of passage of this legislation.

So I urge you, I invite you, I embrace you to come along with us and participate actively on the phone, written letters, visits with your members of the House and Senate to make this happen. Thank you very much for giving me the honor to listen to Bill Mitchell and all the other fine people tell their stories and their need for support on things that are very important to them.

Now I would like to turn this over to one of the two cochairs. We have two cochairs of the Older Americans Caucus, as you know. They are outstanding congressmen. They

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are vigorous. Bill Hughes, who is leaving, has devoted so much of his time to this Congress. He's one of the finest people. He cochairs the Older Americans in Congress with one of the more competent people we have in our caucus, Ron Widen of the State of Oregon. Ron, I'd like to turn it over to you right now. Thank you.

MR. WIDEN: Well, Dave, thank you. I have to tell you, after you've heard the First Lady and her wonderful speech, and the Majority Leader, and Dave Bonner, you feel a little bit like Tugboat Annie coming up after the Queen Mary has left.

Let me just say, very briefly, under the leadership of Bill Hughes, the Older Americans Caucus is going to be having a hearing. It's going to be a unique hearing because we're going to hear from 50 seniors over the next hour, hour and a half, and hear directly from the grassroots. We want all of you to stay because in a typical kind of hearing we always hear from the lobbyists.

We always hear from the insurance companies. We always hear from the drug companies. We always hear from the people who have lots of power and lots of money to spend on the political process. Today's hearing is going to be different. We now that political change starts at the grassroots and moves up. It doesn't start in Washington, D.C., and trickle down.

So we're going to have a 15-minute break. Then we hope you'll stay around and pitch in. We're going to roll up our sleeves and make sure the voice of the people is heard.

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