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6/29/94
Preservation Group Exam

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 29, 1994

REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT PREVENTION GROUP EVENT

MRS. CLINTON: Secretary Shalala joined this administration, at the President's request, to be the Secretary of HHS. She left the University of Wisconsin very regretfully, but not before she had put into place a football program that eventually won the Rose Bowl this year.

And everywhere I travel around the country, especially in the midwest, people from Wisconsin come up and say, "say hello to Secretary Shalala," because they're still happy that she did what she did. Well, she is doing just the same, as she has put HHS on the footing not to win a Rose Bowl, but to really win a lot of advantages and benefits for people who need them, and I think she will go down in our history as one of the great secretaries of HHS. And we're very grateful to her (inaudible).

I want to thank also the members of congress who are here. The senators had to leave for a vote. We heard from Sen. Daschle, but also Sen. Metzenbaum and Sen. Pell were here. Both of those gentlemen have also been very strong supporters of health care reform.

And we are delighted that, in addition to the congressman from Connecticut, who gave a great speech and who has, as you can tell, a personal stake in this with adult onset diabetes, we have with us other leaders of the House of Representatives. Chairman Bill Ford, whose committee reported out very meaningful health care reform last week, and we are very grateful, Congressman Mike Kreidler, who is sitting next to the chairman, who has been an absolutely persistent advocate for health care reform, particularly for people with mental health problems and with preexisting conditions, and two of the members of the House Ways and Means Committee, who know as much about health care and about the real need of Americans, Congressman Ben Cardin (phonetic) and Congressman John Lewis. We're very pleased (inaudible)

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You know, the secretary, in her whipping up enthusiasm for universal coverage is really right to make that the cheer that should come from this gathering, because you represent and you are among the many millions of Americans who have had to use and rely upon our health care system. You represent the now nearly 40 million uninsured Americans. You represent the many millions more who are effectively uninsured, because they now have policies that demand, as we heard the story, a \$5,000 deductible from the woman in Sam's district.

You are representing the more than 81 million Americans who are in families with someone with a preexisting condition. You are on the front lines of understanding both what is best about our health care system and what no longer works and needs to be changed.

I hope that every American who is now really focusing on this health care debate will do their own internal balance sheet, if you will. Let's put on one side all of the reasons why we need health care reform and why we need universal coverage. Let's add up, in our own minds, our own personal experiences. Let's think about our friends and family members who have had some kind of health problems, or an accident that has occurred to them. Let's understand that it is cheaper if we all are insured, taking care of one another, than what we do now.

If you add up the economic reasons why we need health care reform, the social reasons why it's the right thing to do, the political reasons why our congress, represented by members here who know what is at stake, needs to act on behalf of health care reform, and if you then add the moral, the ethical, the human reasons, the balance sheet is overwhelmingly in favor of guaranteed health insurance for every American.

Universal coverage means putting you and your doctor in charge again. It means that you and your doctor know what care you need, not your insurance company.

It needs that it means that a preexisting condition no longer serves as a bar to coverage, or at such a high obstacle that many can no longer afford to surmount it. It means that you no longer have to worry about the fine print in your insurance policy, you know, the fine print which says you've reached your lifetime limit in the care for an acute

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or chronic health condition.

It means you no longer have to worry about what job you can take. It means, if you're divorced, you no longer have to suffer with the possibility you cannot afford insurance. It means if you're on welfare you can actually get off and get a job, because you will have the same health benefits there as you would have if you just gave up and stayed on welfare.

There are so many reasons why now is the time to act. And you in this room, all who are behind me and all who are in front of me, know more dramatically than most what happens when you have a health problem and your insurance is not there for you.

If we do not act, two groups of Americans will continue to be secure: the very rich, who will be able to afford whatever health care they need, and the very poor, who you will take care of, because they will be on government assistance. But everybody in the middle, people like the Chapmans, everyone else who has worked hard, who has tried to do the right thing, they will be even more insecure than they are today.

When the health care reform debate started, some people thought it was only about making sure that the uninsured had insurance. That is not what health care reform is about. It is not about that, because no one in this room, I don't care how well insured you are today, is guaranteed you will have the same insurance at the same cost, covering the same benefits, this time next year. Not a single person.

Health care reform is about all of us, and those of you who know what it is like to suffer from acute and chronic illness know that better than any of the rest of us. You carry so many burdens because of the illnesses you and family members have suffered from.

But it is also true that as we learn more about how our genetic system works, as we learn more about biochemistry -- I believe that in a few years nearly every one of us will be at risk of being uninsured in the absence of universal coverage. Because as we learn more about how diseases start, and how it ravages the body, we will learn that most of us carry some kind of gene that could lead to adult onset diabetes, that could lead to Alzheimer's, that

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could lead to breast cancer.

What will we do when we learn all of that scientific information? And that is coming around the corner. The very people who say we can wait until 2000 or 2002 to insure every American do not understand that by 2000 and 2002, scientific evidence will demonstrate most of us are at risk of some kind of disease at some point in our lives.

Then the faces of the people I have seen as I traveled around the country talking to the parents of children suffering from congenital diseases in our children's hospitals, holding the hands of husbands and wives who are losing their loved one to the effects of stroke or heart disease, or Alzheimer's, sitting and listening to the stories of what it means when breast cancer or AIDS ravages a family. Then it will not be the story of someone else. It will be all of our stories.

That's what is at stake in this health care debate. And the people who want to argue about when it should happen, and how it should happen, and even whether it should happen, the people who want somebody else to pay for their health care, they are people who don't yet recognize the very fundamental truth: that we are all in this together.

And so I hope that in the next days and weeks every one of you who has been touched by disease or accident will let your voices be heard. Let everyone know that universal coverage now is not only the right thing to do for America, it is the smart thing.

When we began this effort many months ago, my husband and I were visited by one of our best friends, a couple that I've known ever since grammar school, that ended up as high school sweethearts getting married. The husband is a small business man, the wife is a stay-at-home mother with their three children.

We spent many, many hours talking about raising our children and all of the challenges of life today. But no conversation meant more to the President and me than one we had with our friend, who runs a small business, who had only four employees, and who has always tried to give health insurance to his employees.

About a year ago or so, before this conversation

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occurred, one of his employees had a new baby, a baby with Down syndrome, something that can happen to anyone. And when my friend then went to his insurance broker to renew the insurance, he was told they couldn't offer a policy that was going to cover everything, like they had, and that they would have to really increase the prices because of the employee with the Down syndrome baby.

But, the insurance agent said to my friend, "You do have a choice, you know. You could fire him, and that way you wouldn't have to pay insurance for his family, and we could still insure the rest of your employees and your family at the rate you have been paying." My friend, who is not radical, he doesn't march, he doesn't picket, he doesn't do any of that -- he said he was stunned. This has been a man who had worked with him for years, a good employee, a good family man.

And my friend said he looked at the insurance agent and he said, "You don't understand, do you? This man is like a member of our family. I couldn't fire him because his baby has a problem." But it was very hard finding affordable insurance. And it is a continuing struggle for small businesses that care.

If we allow insurance interests, and small business interests that are getting a free ride from the rest of us, to determine the fate of health care reform, we will not only continue to pay much more than we should in dollars, we will continue to pay a price that should be unacceptable in a country like ours, where we leave people out, and we leave children behind because of what kind of problems they have. We can do better, and with your help we will.

Now is the time for America to give health insurance to every American. Thank you very much.

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