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## Drug Benefit Not Certain for All on Medicare

By ROBERT PEAR

**W**ASHINGTON, Feb. 6 — Tommy G. Thompson, the secretary of health and human services, said today that he could not guarantee that President Bush's Medicare proposal would include prescription drug benefits for elderly people who remain in the traditional fee-for-service Medicare program.

While insisting that the elderly would not be forced to join health maintenance organizations, Mr. Thompson left open the possibility that they might need to join some type of private health plan to get drug benefits.

In testimony before the House Ways and Means Committee, Mr. Thompson was vague about President Bush's proposal to revamp Medicare and offer drug coverage to the elderly.

"The final decisions have not been made," Mr. Thompson said, in a formulation that he repeated more than a dozen times. "The proposal is still being worked on."

Mr. Thompson said he could not answer one of the biggest questions about the Bush proposal: whether Medicare beneficiaries would have to leave the traditional program to obtain drug coverage.

The question has immense political significance because more than 85 percent of the 40 million Medicare beneficiaries are in the fee-for-service program.

In his opening statement, Mr. Thompson said Mr. Bush's budget "proposes a prescription drug benefit that would be available to all beneficiaries." He promised, "The president is not going to force seniors into H.M.O.'s to get prescription drugs."

Mr. Thompson said he saw "a big distinction" between H.M.O.'s and less restrictive private plans, like preferred provider organizations. His carefully worded answers left open the possibility that Medicare beneficiaries might need to join private plans, not necessarily H.M.O.'s, to get drug benefits.

The same ambiguity existed in Mr. Bush's State of the Union address last week. "All seniors should have the choice of a health care plan that provides prescription drugs," Mr. Bush said.

Representative Lloyd Doggett, Democrat of Texas, asked Mr. Thompson if he believed that beneficiaries in the fee-for-service program should have "a statutory guarantee" of drug coverage.

Mr. Thompson said he could not answer because the administration was still working on its proposal.

In his State of the Union address, Mr. Bush asked Congress for "\$400 billion over the next decade to reform and strengthen Medicare." Mr. Thompson apologized today for being unable to answer

questions about the proposal.

Mr. Thompson would not say what drug benefits, if any, would be offered to the 35 million people in the original fee-for-service Medicare program. He refused to rule out the possibility that the new drug benefits might be available only through private health plans that sign contracts with Medicare.

Representative Sander M. Levin, Democrat of Michigan, asked Mr. Thompson about a Bush administration document that said there would be "no prescription drug coverage" for people in the traditional program.

"That remains one option," Mr. Thompson said. "But there are several other options."

Mr. Levin also asked Mr. Thompson if he was able to assure people in the traditional Medicare program that they could get the same drug coverage as people in private plans.

"No, I'm not," the secretary said.

Mr. Thompson appeared to be in an awkward position. While requesting \$400 billion, he could not specify how the money would be used. Nor could he say how much would go for drug benefits and how much for higher payments to doctors and other health care providers.

Several lawmakers said they were frustrated at the lack of detail. Thomas A. Scully, the presidential appointee in charge of Medicare and Medicaid, said, "I am as frustrated as they are."

Representative Stephanie Tubbs Jones, Democrat of Ohio, said she and her elderly constituents were nervous about relying on private plans to supply drug benefits. "H.M.O.'s have run out on Medicare recipients," Ms. Tubbs Jones said. In the last five years, 2.4 million beneficiaries have been dropped by H.M.O.'s, which say Medicare pays them too little.

Mr. Thompson said he hoped Congress would act in the next 10 days to prevent a 4.4 percent cut in Medicare payments to doctors, scheduled to take effect on March 1. Senior lawmakers in the House and the Senate have very different ideas about how to achieve that goal, and the Bush administration declined to take sides.