

Cuomo budget would limit drug choices for poor, raise costs for elderly

Health commissioner says medications still would meet needs

By **Tom Precious** News Albany Bureau Published: March 4, 2011, 12:39 AM

ALBANY -- The governor's proposed budget will push prescription drug costs higher for about 85,000 senior citizens in the state, and physicians will face new restrictions on prescribing drugs for people with everything from AIDS to depression.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's health care budget came under heightened scrutiny Thursday during legislative hearings, held before the governor even made public a final portion of his bill to cut more than \$2 billion in Medicaid spending.

The push-back by legislators on a joint State Senate and Assembly fiscal panel touched everything from the governor's plan to limit medical malpractice awards to what lawmakers say is a more than \$30 million cut for Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo.

Sen. J. Kemp Hannon, R-Garden City, chairman of the Senate Health Committee, said the state "worked very hard" over the years to pump up Roswell Park to give it a national reputation.

"It gets cut by just an unconscionable level," Hannon said, pointing to Cuomo's reduction of a third for the institute's state funding.

Dr. Nirav R. Shah, the state health commissioner and a Buffalo-area native, said he was "well aware" of the reductions facing Roswell Park.

"It's a big cut. We need to figure out how to make Roswell [Park] whole," said Shah, who did not elaborate.

Patient advocacy groups, meanwhile, condemned a Cuomo plan to transfer prescription drug decisions for some Medicaid patients from their physicians to the Health Department.

Critics say Medicaid patients suffering from a range of illnesses often have to try a battery of drugs until the right one provides relief.

"Physicians should have the final say," said Kathleen Arntsen of the Lupus Foundation, who suffers from several autoimmune diseases. "New York State officials do not belong on the medical team."

Shah called the drug proposal an example of the administration's plan to "meet the budget targets while preserving quality care while perhaps limiting choices from seven medicines down to one or two that would still fulfill and meet patient needs."

In a separate drug fight, the Cuomo budget calls for cuts to the EPIC program, which provides drug benefits for 295,000 senior citizens. At the hearing, Shah said recipients would face \$30 to \$100 per month in higher prescription drug costs.

State health officials later clarified the commissioner's remarks, saying some kind of increase in monthly drug expenses would affect about 85,000 of EPIC's enrollees.

For some -- officials could not provide a number -- the increase could exceed \$600 a year. Officials contend the federal Medicare program could pick up some of the expenses now covered by the state.