



Biden prioritises health care in State of the Union speech

Plans to protect reproductive rights, further reduce drug prices, and improve women's health research have been welcomed by some experts. Susan Jaffe reports from Washington, DC.

President Joe Biden's third State of the Union address to Congress on March 7 earned good reviews from several health-care advocates and experts. Often speaking directly to American voters, Biden strongly reaffirmed commitments to protecting abortion access, lowering prescription drug prices, expanding the Affordable Care Act, and preventing gun violence, among other health concerns.

The State of the Union address is typically a report to Congress on the nation's progress and goals entwined with occasional lofty rhetoric, but this one was different. Biden is also the Democrats' presumptive presidential candidate running against former President Donald Trump, the Republicans' presumptive presidential candidate, a rare backdrop for a State of the Union address.

"This speech signals that health care will be a big part of President Biden's campaign this year", said Larry Levitt, Executive Vice President for Health Policy at KFF, formerly the Kaiser Family Foundation. "Biden has had a very consequential first term on health-care issues, though voters haven't really noticed yet." Instead of "a true State of the Union speech", Levitt said it marked the beginning of Biden's general election campaign. "There wasn't much benefit to Biden trying to lay out an agenda for Congress", he continued, given the political deadlock that has stalled much legislation.

Less than 10 min after he began speaking, Biden criticised an Alabama Supreme Court ruling that would effectively end in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and demanded that Congress guarantee access to IVF. Then he took aim at the Supreme Court's decision invalidating Roe v. Wade, for which Trump takes responsibility after appointing three conservative justices.

"Many of you in this chamber and my predecessor are promising to pass a national ban on reproductive freedom", Biden said. "My God, what [other] freedom...would you take away?" Biden pledged to guarantee abortion rights, with a crucial caveat and a nod to the upcoming election. "If you, the American people, send me a Congress that supports the right to choose, I promise you, I will restore Roe v. Wade as the law of the land again."

Planned Parenthood Action Fund was among the reproductive-rights advocacy groups that welcomed Biden's continued commitment. "Reproductive health care is under attack, from birth control to IVF to abortion care", said President and Chief Executive Officer Alexis McGill Johnson in a statement. "Patients, providers, and communities need unwavering, vocal support, coupled with action from our leaders in the White House, through the halls of Congress, and on court benches throughout the country."

Among several health and science announcements in the speech, Biden offered new strategies to reduce the cost of prescription drugs. "Americans pay more for prescription drugs than anywhere in the world", he said. "It's wrong and I'm ending it." Biden wants to expand several provisions of the Inflation Reduction Act, even though Congress passed the law without a single Republican vote. He called on Congress to allow Medicare to negotiate prices for hundreds of more drugs over a decade. Pharmaceutical makers are suing to block the current plan. They claim the negotiation process is unfair because if they do not cut prices, they must pay an excise tax.

Another provision Biden would expand caps Medicare patients' co-payments for most insulin

prescriptions at \$35 a month. He said the drug should be available at that price "for every American who needs it—everyone". He would also extend next year's \$2000 limit on out-of-pocket spending on drugs for Medicare beneficiaries to all Americans. That proposal drew praise from Merith Basey, Executive Director of Patients for Affordable Drugs. "A \$2000 cap for anyone not on Medicare would be life-changing for so many in this country."

Biden also called on Congress to "pass \$12 billion to transform women's health research". Michal Elovitz, Dean of Women's Health Research at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, has been working in women's health for 25 years and said this was the first time she heard the subject discussed so prominently in a State of the Union address. "For too long, there has been gender inequity in health care and in research", she said. "There's so much in women's health that has just been undiscovered and underfunded."

Biden also reiterated his support for a ban on assault rifles and more extensive background checks for gun purchasers. "These proposals are evidence-based and we know they work", said Georges Benjamin, Executive Director of the American Public Health Association.

Robert Moffit, a Senior Research Fellow in the Center for Health and Welfare Policy at the conservative Heritage Foundation reflected much of the Republican response to Biden's address. "It was a speech that was clearly directed toward the base of the Democratic Party, which is very liberal", he said. "I don't think there was any attempt here to reach out to moderates or independents, and certainly not Republicans."

Susan Jaffe

For more on the health implications of the Inflation Reduction Act see [World Report Lancet 2022; 400: 551-52](#)

For more on efforts to reduce drug costs in the USA see [World Report Lancet 2023; 402: 359-60](#)