

By Lyric Wallwork Winik

## [In the News] Your Congress, Your Health

**Y**our Senators and Representative don't sit in on your doctor's appointments, but perhaps they should. The 535 men and women who vote in the U.S. Capitol have enormous control over your health and well-being.

And this spring, Congress begins debating everything from how much to invest in medical research to how doctors practice medicine. But are Congress' priorities also *your* priorities?

● **The fate of medical research.** No one spends more on basic medical research than the federal government. This year, Congress allocated \$29 billion to the National Institutes of Health. Many of the tax dollars previously given to such research have brought us closer to cures. Deaths from cancer, for example, are falling across the nation. As part of its

spending cuts last year, however, Congress reduced the budget of the National Cancer Institute, part of the NIH. "A bright young investigator with a great idea now has only about a one-in-10 chance of getting funding," says John Seffrin, head of the American Cancer Society. We may face a shortage of researchers and lifesaving

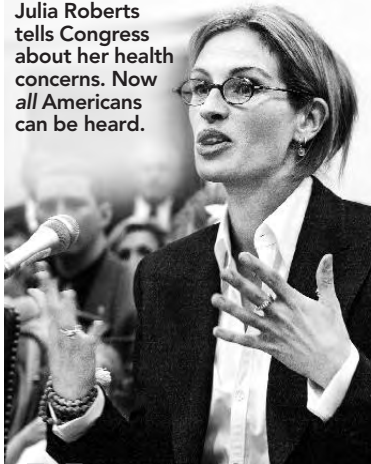
clinical trials as a result of the cuts.

● **The future of health insurance.** Congress will debate whether we continue to insure Americans primarily through employers or through another system and whether health insurance will be tax deductible. It's also Congress' job to

find a way to cover the millions of uninsured Americans.

● **The future of medicine.** Congress helps determine what type of medical care you get. Through programs like Medicare and Medicaid, it decides how much doctors and hospitals are paid and thus what type of care, including prevention, is emphasized. According to Research!America—a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to health research, the U.S. spends less than 6 cents of every health dollar

Julia Roberts tells Congress about her health concerns. Now all Americans can be heard.



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—John Porter, chairman of Research!America

on research to prevent or treat illness.

Another big question for Congress is how much to change our health-care system. For example, should it mandate a “merit pay” program to reward those who provide quality care? Should malpractice rules be changed? And do we need more doctors? Since Congress allocates money for medical

training, it influences that too.

“Improving America’s health care is foremost in the minds of many in Congress and the Administration,” says Dr. Carolyn Clancy, director of the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. “Health care is the No. 1 domestic issue on the minds of Americans,” adds Research!America’s chairman, former Rep. John Porter of Illinois. “Voices from every part of our society are calling for new ideas.”

## **MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD**

“All Americans deserve the best health care in the world,” says John Porter of Research!America, which is launching a new initiative called Your Congress—Your Health. “We need a conversation with Congress to achieve that goal.” Go to [parade.com](http://parade.com) to tell us what health issues matter most to



you. Congress will be invited to respond to a questionnaire that addresses your concerns.