

President prepares for healthplan unveiling

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Clinton put finishing touches on his sweeping plan to bring health coverage to all Americans Tuesday, and he and top aides went all-out to rally support and defend the program's financial underpinnings.

Hit from all sides with questions about how he would pay for the new

health benefits, Clinton replied: "I'm not trying to sugarcoat it. I have worked harder to get better cost estimates on this than anybody ever has."

Aides said a final decision was still to be made on at least one contentious matter: How to mete out new "sin taxes" on tobacco and perhaps alcohol.

Wednesday night at 9 p.m. EDT, Clinton delivers what may be the most important speech of his presidency, laying out his vision for a health-care sys-

tem that would offer affordable coverage to everyone by the end of 1997.

Summing up the main goal, he said simply, "You would be able to get health insurance; it would be adequate benefits, and you wouldn't lose it."

Employers would be required to pay 80 percent of average health-care premiums, with workers paying the rest. Small businesses and low-income workers would get federal subsidies to help them pay their share.

Clinton shuffled between interviews and sold his plan to newspaper columnists over veal and asparagus at an East Wing luncheon.

"I'm anxious for this debate to begin," Clinton told the columnists.

The administration made it clear that much of the plan is open to negotiation.

Mrs. Clinton, joining her husband for lunch, said that if Congress opted to go more slowly in phasing in universal coverage, that could be acceptable.

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