

Doctors protest rising malpractice insurance costs

By Jill Barton
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

More than 800 doctors in Florida, and a dozen more in Mississippi, stayed off the job Monday to protest rising malpractice insurance costs.

Organizers of the protest in the Palm Beach County area said the doctors were staying off the job to attend a two-day conference looking at the problem.

Palm Beach hospitals prepared for the absence by adding to their emergency room staff and rescheduling elective surgeries. No problems had

been reported Monday.

"We want the patients to understand that there's a major crisis and something has to be done soon," said Dr. Stephen Babic, a Delray Beach cardiologist.

About two dozen surgeons walked off the job in West Virginia earlier this month. Doctors in New Jersey are considering a similar protest in February.

A task force appointed by Florida Gov. Jeb Bush recently voted to recommend that jury awards for punitive damages and pain-and-suffering awards in medical malpractice cases be capped at \$250,000. A final report is due by the end of this month.

"The quality of care for Floridians will be diminished if we don't deal with medical malpractice reform. In the long run, that's the issue," Bush said Monday.

Since 1975, rates for professional liability insurance have increased five-fold across the nation. In comparison, rates for doctors in California, where reforms were passed in 1975, rose only 167 percent during the same period, Cline said.

Wayne Portch, 56, said he lost both legs below the knee and parts of four fingers after two doctors failed to diagnose an infection over four days. He and his wife say they're looking for

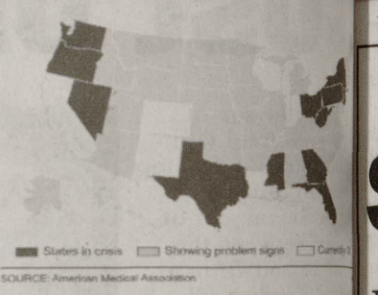
accountability.

In Mississippi, a dozen surgeons took leaves of absence Monday from four Gulf Coast hospitals — Memorial Hospital, Garden Park Medical Center, Gulf Coast Medical Center and Hancock Medical Center.

Mississippi Gov. Ronnie Musgrove criticized Mississippi's Legislature for not taking action during a special session on tort reform last year.

"My plan included the creation of a compensation fund to address the immediate needs of health care providers and to ensure health care coverage for our people," he said.

AMA says 12 states in health care crisis
The American Medical Association says 12 states and the District of Columbia are in a health care crisis because of high malpractice insurance premiums that have forced some doctors to move to states with lower rates. The states are: Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri and New Jersey.



SOURCE: American Medical Association

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