

Dialysis center drums up support

By [James Roberts](#), Staff Writer
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Taylor County Dialysis Center is busy Thursday morning. About a dozen patients are hooked up to dialysis machines - machines which free their blood of waste products that their failing kidneys can no longer do.

The three-and-a-half-hour treatment, administered three times a week, keeps them alive.

Yet, while other medical programs are keeping up with inflation thanks to annual rate updates through Medicare, dialysis centers are falling behind.

"We're not getting the annual increases that others are," said Leitha Olson, Taylor County Dialysis Center administrator.

In the 30 years dialysis programs have received federal dollars through Medicare, only a handful of increases have come along.

"We need these to continue to improve services," said Craig Schwarting, regional director of DaVita, the company that runs the center.

But dialysis centers may soon find relief.

H.R. 1298, the Kidney Care Quality and Improvement Act of 2005, seeks to cover more of dialysis patients' out-of-pocket costs and fund education initiatives. Nationally, 75 percent of dialysis patients are Medicare recipients. At the Taylor County Dialysis Center, all of the 50 patients are insured through Medicare.

Congressman Ron Lewis, a co-sponsor of the bill, pledged his support for a dialysis care bill while in Campbellsville on Thursday.

Lewis was invited to tour the Taylor County Dialysis Center, while officials there hoped to express how important H.R. 1298 was to dialysis facilities across the U.S. and their patients.

Saying he was impressed with the facility, Lewis said he is a co-sponsor of the bill and would work to get it passed.

"It will help meet those expenses that are falling through the cracks," Lewis said. "We're trying to meet those needs."

Medicare currently covers about 80 percent of the \$125 per treatment cost of dialysis.

But as costs go up, that percentage stays the same.



photo/[JAMES ROBERTS](#) Taylor County Dialysis Center Administrator Leitha Olson tells Congressman Ron Lewis how the dialysis machines work. Lewis was invited to the center to garner support for a bill that would help patients pay for their treatment and implement educational programs.



"If we had an inflation increase, which the bill provides, we would be OK," Schwarting said.

Equally important to covering more of patients' costs, Olson said, is the millions of dollars the bill would provide for educational programs.

The bill would provide \$2 million for a five-year project in at least three states that would demonstrate how to prevent and treat chronic kidney disease. The bill would also provide \$2 million to help those with kidney disease develop self-management skills.

According to Schwarting, these programs could prove highly beneficial for those with early stages of kidney failure.

"People don't really die of kidney failure," he said, "They die of complications. The biggest reason is that their heart wears out."

Because the kidneys can no longer dispose of waste products on their own, whatever a dialysis patient drinks stays in their system until a treatment removes it. Olson said a patient may come into the center with as much as 30 pounds of fluid because of the beverages they drink.

This, Schwarting said, makes the heart work harder and can lead to heart failure.

"Diet is very important for people with kidney failure," he said.

Among other things, the educational programs would inform those with diabetes or hypertension about the proper diet to prevent kidney failure.

Lewis said he feels the bill has a good chance of being signed into law, but that it likely will not happen this year.

"We are probably going to have to wait until Medicare is reopened for new legislation," he said. "That will be 2006."

Schwarting said DaVita will take that opportunity to inform more people.

"Support for the bill is growing. I think we are a little more optimistic on the House side than the Senate. I understand their dilemma of how to fund all of these medical issues.

"We believe it has a good chance in 2006. This gives us some time to go out and educate the congressmen and senators."

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