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Health-care interests court the powerful

Now it's the Democrats in Congress who are getting more of the campaign cash

By Maureen Groppe / Star Washington Bureau
Posted: August 9, 2009

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WASHINGTON -- The doctors who own Indiana Orthopaedic Hospital decided a few years ago they needed to be more vocal in defending doctor-owned hospitals against charges that they're not in the best interest of patients.

"We had a good story to tell," said Dr. John Dietz, hospital board chairman.

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So the hospital hired a federal lobbyist in 2008 and started inviting members of Indiana's congressional delegation to visit. Around the time of the visits, hospital employees are told how to contribute to the lawmaker if they wish.

Sen. Evan Bayh, D-Ind., who visited in January, received 38 contributions from hospital doctors, worth \$35,500.

Dietz said most of the discussion between Bayh and the employees was about the economy, but he was also able to talk to Bayh about the hospital.

"We've focused on just making sure that lawmakers in the Indiana delegation are aware of who we are and what we stand for and what we're doing," Dietz said.

Contributions from doctors, hospitals, drug makers and others in the health-care sector have gone up almost every election cycle since the Center for Responsive Politics started tracking them in 1990. Contributions totaled \$21.9 million for the 1990 federal elections and hit \$167.2 million last year.

"Clearly what we're seeing is that health care is becoming a bigger and bigger player," said Dave Levinthal, spokesman for the nonpartisan center.

For the Orthopaedic Hospital, a top concern is whether health-care legislation would restrict doctor-owned hospitals, such as by limiting their growth.

That's part of a debate about doctor-owned specialty hospitals, including whether there's a conflict of interest and whether they cherry-pick patients and

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Source: Campaign disclosure reports

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pull profit centers out of community hospitals.

Dietz said doctor-owned hospitals need to get out their message that the care they provide is more efficient and of a higher quality.

Health-care interests worried about how changes to the system could affect their bottom lines are increasingly focusing their contributions on Democrats, who now control Congress and the White House.

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Of the more than \$400,000 that Indiana's 11 lawmakers have received in campaign contributions from health-care interests since January, about 78 percent went to the six Democrats. Bayh got the most: \$174,450, or about 41 percent.

The recipient of the next-largest chunk was Rep. Baron Hill, D-Seymour, who got \$79,018, or about 19 percent. Hill sits on one of the committees that wrote the House health-care bill.

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Bayh is not on any of the committees working on the Senate's health-care bill. But he is up for re-election next year and is a moderate Democrat who doesn't always follow the majority of his party, so he could be a pivotal swing vote.

Indianapolis-based Eli Lilly and Co., which has had the most active federal political action committee of Indiana's health interests, stopped giving the large majority of its contributions to Republicans in the last election cycle.

And the more than \$346,000 that the PAC for Indianapolis-based health insurer WellPoint made to federal candidates since January are close to evenly split between the parties; by comparison, 64

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