

Connecticut cardiologists have withdrawn their support for the proposed SustiNet [health care reform](#) package, a possible sign that support is eroding among doctors.

The SustiNet program would create large pools of people, including those who can't currently afford health insurance, that would theoretically drive down premium costs by competing with the plans of private insurers. Among other cost savings, it would designate a single doctor or practice for each patient, to reduce emergency care use, and create new "best-use" procedures for a variety of ailments to reduce the number of tests doctors order.

But a key provision of the plan was that doctors, in return for following the new procedures and ordering fewer tests, would be protected from malpractice suits if the outcome of a case was not favorable for the patient. However, with backing from the Connecticut Trial Lawyers Association, that provision was removed from the SustiNet bill two weeks ago.

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Cardiologists are considered a particularly important group for the new best-use procedures because they tend to order a battery of expensive tests when patients show signs of heart trouble. If specialists like them failed to participate in the SustiNet program, cutting medical costs could be more difficult.

On Tuesday, the Connecticut chapter of the American College of Cardiology withdrew its support for the bill and said that it would circulate an open letter to House Speaker [Christopher G. Donovan](#) and Gov. [Dannel P. Malloy](#) saying that it could not support the bill without the malpractice protection.

SustiNet has the strong support of the Malloy administration, Democrats in the legislature, and health care groups.

"The elimination of this key provision, will result in a dramatic increase in the cost of healthcare in Connecticut, and more patient exposure to tests of limited value that could have been avoided under the original bill," said Dr. Neal Lippman, a cardiologist with [St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center](#) in Hartford and president of the Connecticut Chapter of the American College of Cardiology.

Dr. Gilead Lancaster, the president-elect of the cardiologist group, said that the elimination of the provision might also discourage doctors from participating in SustiNet.

"Doctors with already busy practices might have doubts about taking on SustiNet patients, particularly since it's not clear if the plan would offer adequate provider protection for adhering with its science-based guidelines," Lancaster said.

Two weeks ago, when the malpractice provision was eliminated from the bill by the General Assembly's Public Health Committee, major medical groups in the state condemned the move but did not withdraw their support. A spokesman for the Connecticut State Medical Society said the group remained "very concerned" about the elimination of the malpractice provision but had not yet decided

whether to withdraw its support formally.

Rep. Elizabeth B. Ritter, D-[Waterford](#), co-chairwoman of the public health committee, said that the malpractice provision was eliminated mostly out of concern for establishing an unenforceable double standard in the state. Patients who did not receive a particular test or procedure from a non-SustiNet doctor, she said, would be free to sue for malpractice, while patients of a SustiNet doctor would lose that right.

"Legislation to create a new, affordable health care program for Connecticut is not the appropriate place to accomplish tort reform," Ritter said. "Yes, we have a problem with malpractice cases in this state, and the doctors know that I want to address it. But we can't do that in a bill created for another reason, and with a provision that would create a double standard for redress."