

After three weeks of negotiations on medical malpractice, the Mississippi Legislature has adjourned until October 7.

The health care crisis in Mississippi continues.

In May, I said I would call a special session to address the issue of the affordability and availability of medical malpractice insurance for our doctors. This issue goes much farther than the doctor's office, though; it affects every Mississippian in every community in our state.

The calling of a special session was delayed at the request of the legislative leadership, so their committees could work together to study the issue and conduct hearings around the state. Indications from the legislative leadership pointed toward substantial agreement on medical malpractice reform.

Unfortunately, nothing has changed since May.

Legislators returned to the capitol building on September 5, with a clear and specific call to action. That call was "exclusively to and for no other purpose than the provision of affordable and accessible healthcare for all Mississippians that is at present seriously jeopardized by the inability of many healthcare providers to obtain or afford medical malpractice insurance."

There was a reason for the specificity and clarity of this call. As has been demonstrated before, the consideration of issues tends to be more difficult when more than one issue is on the table.

And, as has been shown over the course of this special session, political agendas and special interests have had too large an impact on the negotiations between House and Senate conferees over medical malpractice legislation.

The entire process has been frustrating. Unfortunately, that's sometimes how the legislative process works. It is slow, it is ugly, and it doesn't always work the way we would hope it would.

Physicians, pharmacists and health care professionals need help, and they need it now. The cost of insurance for our doctors in Mississippi is rapidly rising, as evidenced by the 45 percent increase in medical malpractice insurance premiums recently announced by the Medical Assurance Corporation of Mississippi.

There's no doubt about the need for some type of solution. Plans have been offered and rejected at the conference table many times, but that does not mean the work toward a solution should stop.

This issue is not about doctors, lawyers, big business, small business or special interests. This issue is about the quality, availability and accessibility of health care for 2.8 million Mississippians. We must focus on what is best for our people and solve this health care crisis.

There's a challenge before us here, and we should not shy away from this challenge.

The Legislature has adjourned for now. The crisis in health care doesn't have that option.