

The people of this state need and deserve the very best health care available, and it's time to get the whole job done.

The health care crisis in Mississippi has been looming over the state for months. After a summer of meetings by a joint legislative committee, I called a special session to address the need for medical malpractice reform and craft a solution to the crisis.

The call for the special session was clear, the need for legislation obvious, and the impact of special interests evident. The issue at hand, however, was not just about the people working the halls of the capitol building; rather, it was about the quality of health care in Mississippi for the people in every community around this state.

After more than a month, the House and Senate were ready to vote on a conference report. The end result of the time spent in conference was a piece of legislation that offered a foundation for better health care in Mississippi.

Signing the bill into law last week, I commented that we were sending a message to the rest of the nation that Mississippi is a good place to practice medicine and its people have access to quality health care.

That's a message we want people to hear, but there is still much more that can be done to build on this legislation.

Early in the special session, I proposed an insurance pool, which could be more accurately described as a compensation fund, to help Mississippi's doctors with the affordability and availability of medical malpractice insurance.

This fund offers a tremendous opportunity to further address the short-term needs of the health care community in our state and speed the return of insurance companies to this market.

The work to add the compensation fund to the medical malpractice legislation will not stop. It is an integral component in the strength of our health care in Mississippi, and it needs to be part of the system and available to our physicians.

With the new medical malpractice law on the books and scheduled to become effective on January 1, 2003, I followed through on a promise made more than a month ago and expanded the call of the special session to include general civil justice reform.

The promise to expand the call was offered from the outset of the session, and it has been honored. The work of the Legislature on civil justice reform is important, and the legislative leadership should encourage members to act quickly and responsibly.

It is important for any civil justice legislation to be fair, balanced and reasonable. Any legislation that would protect those who pillage and raid the financial holdings of our families, who cook the books for their own profit, who prey on the elderly to satisfy their hunger for money, will not suffice.

The people of Mississippi can afford no less.