

Senator visits Valley Baptist

Children's center grand opening planned today; tours on Saturday

By ELIZABETH PIERSON

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HARLINGEN — Medical malpractice rates in the Rio Grande Valley must decrease if the area is to expect further economic development, as well as healthy residents, Sen. John Cornyn said Thursday.

Doctors all over the country have complained of skyrocketing medical malpractice that make it difficult for them to keep their practices open, and Cornyn, R-Texas, said the Valley is particularly vulnerable to the problem because it is medically under-served.

"I'm not here to really take sides on whether it's lawyers or physicians or insurance companies (at fault)," Cornyn said during a reception Thursday afternoon at Valley Baptist Medical Center.

"What I'm here to say is that it is the patients who get hurt."

Cornyn said he supports a federal bill that would place limits on the amount of money a plaintiff could be awarded in a medical malpractice trial.

He said he did not know an exact amount he would support for the limit, but wants to model the federal law after medical malpractice reform in California, he said.

Cornyn was at VBMC to discuss health-care access and tour the Children's Center, a 62-bed, 42,000-square foot facility that will open to patients on Monday.

The Children's Center will provide specialty care for children so they will not



Star photo by Ric Vasquez

CHILDREN'S CENTER: Jim Springfield, president and CEO of Valley Baptist Medical Center, shows off the Children's Center to U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, Thursday afternoon. The center will specialize in chil-

dren's care, with all equipment and facilities geared toward the children. The center will have a grand opening today at 10 a.m. and tours for the public will be offered on Saturday.

have to travel elsewhere for treatment.

It includes 48 private rooms, 14 pediatric intensive care rooms and is equipped to treat children with heart problems, infectious diseases, cancer and other illnesses.

Cornyn's comments came after impassioned pleas from health-care workers to pass legislation limiting jury awards.

Dr. Elena Marin of Su Clinica Familiar said border residents already become ill and die from many diseases at a higher

rate than residents elsewhere.

Higher insurance rates and doctor shortages create more barriers to medical treatment, she said.

"Senator, we ask for your passionate, committed support ... in passing tort reform legislation that will truly make a difference here," Marin said.

Cornyn said high malpractice insurance rates are causing doctors to leave, and fewer doctors mean health-care access is more difficult for everyone in the Valley.

Frivolous lawsuits have

also forced responsible doctors to practice defensive medicine, which means ordering unnecessary, expensive tests in order to protect themselves from lawsuits in the future, he said.

Jim Springfield, president and chief executive officer of VBMC said he is glad Cornyn is addressing the problem in Congress, but thinks the most effective legislation will come from the Texas Legislature.

"I think we are going to see a pretty good effort by the feds, but at the end of the day, it's going to be the

state," he said.

News this week that the state will have to cut millions from indigent health-care programs in the Valley highlighted the federal government's neglect of the region's health care, Cornyn said.

"I think for too long, the federal government has failed to live up to its responsibility (to the Valley)," Cornyn said.

"The problems here are not necessarily different than elsewhere, but they are much more acute and much more urgent."