

Boy's death highlights US health debate

By Rajesh Mirchandani BBC News, Washington

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In February 2007, there was an outcry in the United States of America over the case of Deamonte Driver, a 12-year-old boy who died because his family could not afford private dental treatment.

"The thing about Deamonte was his smile, he was always smiling," says Gina James, Principal of The Foundation School in Maryland, where Deamonte was a popular and promising student.

It was while he was at school one Thursday in February that Deamonte complained of toothache. On the Saturday he had emergency surgery. An abscess had spread to his brain.

A few weeks later he died.

"Everyone here was shocked," says Ms James.

Deamonte's mother, Alyce, could not afford private health insurance and in the US there is no state health service.

For the poorest there is some free treatment, called Medicaid. But not all dentists or doctors accept Medicaid patients, and Alyce Driver could not afford to pay to have Deamonte's tooth extracted.

This story is not a one-off. Some 45 million Americans are without health insurance, nine million of them children.

Many say it is America's national scandal.

In Washington political opponents have come together on this issue, in part driven by the outcry over Deamonte.

This week, lawmakers - both Democrat and Republican - supported a bill that would help fund insurance for four million more children.

Supporters propose paying for it by increasing taxes on cigarettes.

So, in effect, both supporters and opponents of the bill say the other side risks health coverage for children.

One Democratic Congressman, Elijah Cummings, from Maryland wants to take the health care issue further.

He has proposed "Deamonte's Law", which seeks to ensure every child has access to dental care.

"It's shocking, it's sad," Mr Cummings said of Deamonte's death. "It provides a wake-up call to us all that we have to do better."

Amid all the politicking on Capitol Hill, the fate of Deamonte highlights the tragedy at the heart of this issue: the very real questions about how the richest nation on earth cares for some of its poorest citizens.



A tooth extraction might have saved Deamonte's life