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Double-barreled rip-off

Legislative leaders and Gov. Paterson still can't come up with a budget -- it's now 79 days late and counting -- but trial lawyers have been making out like, well . . . trial lawyers.

OK, you ask, so what else is new?

But this iteration of business as usual is *particularly* egregious.

The Post's Brendan Scott reports that the governor has quietly slipped through a plan to fund a \$465 million gap in the state's medical malpractice insurance plan by taxing every home-, auto- or commercial-insurance policy in the state.

It may not sound like much -- an extra \$3.50 a year for the average driver, who already pays the nation's fourth-highest auto-insurance premiums.

But recall that the "temporary" \$1 surcharge on auto-insurance premiums that was instituted in 1992 is still with us -- and has now grown to \$10.

Yes, at first glance this might seem like a good thing: The fund provides coverage for some 500 high-risk doctors and health-care facilities that can't get malpractice insurance.

But wait: It comes on top of Paterson's move last week to gut a quarter-century-old state cap on legal fees in medical malpractice awards.

On the one hand, Paterson taketh -- and on the other, he taketh even *more*.

And then giveth to the tort bar.

Under the cap-lift proposal, trial lawyers could pocket nearly twice as much as they now do -- from their clients' cut, of course.

That would mean millions for the state's leading law firms.

Firms like Weitz & Luxenberg -- where Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver serves "of counsel" at an undisclosed salary.

And Belluck & Fox -- where Senate Democratic Leader John Sampson has, since January, served of counsel, and whose founding partner is Joseph Belluck, a board member of the state Trial Lawyers Association.

And Meyer, Suozzi, English & Klein, the Long Island powerhouse firm whose partners include former New York Secretary of State Basil Paterson -- the governor's father.

To recap: Paterson *fiils* seeks to raise taxes to replenish the malpractice pay-out pot, while proposing to fatten the fees the tort lawyers can extract.

Paterson *pére* will be so proud.

To say nothing of the Legislature's top two Democrats.

Everyone *else* in New York is coping with hard times -- but the trial lawyers will be hauling it in with both hands.

Still.

Nothing ever changes in Albany.