

AMA Letter to Physician Organizations Regarding Health System Reform

We knew the battle for health system reform was going to be tough; but who could have predicted we'd be dealing with allegations of euthanasia and death panels?

No question that all of us in physician associations have been hearing lots of feedback, not only from our members, but from myriad others who have an interest in the outcome of health system reform. The volume has been ratcheted up considerably during the August congressional recess. With 24/7 cable and internet blogs going full steam, how does anyone know what to believe?

To help physicians better understand what is going on with the legislative process, the AMA is reaching out to its members and members of supporting organizations with facts and resource materials about health system reform, which you can see on our website, www.ama-assn.org/go/reform.

First and foremost, it is important to keep in mind that legislation in the House of Representatives (HR 3200) is very much a work in progress. The bill, as introduced, promised to achieve many of our collective high-priority goals:

- Extending coverage to the uninsured
- Making investments in the physician workforce
- Providing long-term relief from Medicare's flawed physician payment formula
- Increasing the nation's focus on preventive care and wellness initiatives
- Simplifying administrative burdens for patients and physicians

Three committees in the House have already adopted amendments and more will come before the bill is considered on the floor. Meanwhile, two committees in the Senate are still engaged in their own drafting process.

As the legislative process continues, there will be ample opportunity to work with legislators on refinements to the bill. In fact, improvements were already made during the House committee amendment process, particularly with respect to the proposal for a public health insurance plan. It is also important to note that among the House committee amendments was an AMA-backed program to test alternative medical liability reforms.

Some physicians have asked why the AMA supported the House legislation so early in the process. There were several sensible reasons for this strategy:

The original bill contained a core set of high-priority provisions that our organization has long supported;

Bill sponsors were not likely to maintain the \$230+ billion investment in Medicare physician spending if we did not register support for the bill (hospitals, the home health sector, Medicare Advantage plans and pharmaceutical companies are all facing cuts in the tens and hundreds of billions of dollars); and

As early supporters, we are well positioned to help shape revisions to this bill, as well as the final legislation that will ultimately be presented to the President.

Not only will AMA and other physician organizations continue to work collaboratively with legislators of both political parties, we will share our views with the White House...and have done so already. For instance, the AMA and other physician groups have registered strong concerns with the White House regarding recent comments made by President Obama regarding tonsillectomies and amputations for diabetics. In no uncertain terms, we have told White House staff that the examples cited by the President were misleading. Further we have urged that the President publicly recognize that physicians take an oath and live by a code of ethics that commits the medical profession to put patients' interest before economics or self-interest.

While some of the information physicians have received reflects legitimate differences of opinion, other hyperbole reflects narrow political agendas and is purposefully misleading.

The AMA has also developed a dedicated health system reform web page on which we are continually posting important facts, breaking news and web links, so that physicians have access to the best, most up-to-date information about reform.

Visit www.ama-assn.org/go/reform now to sign up for e-updates, get the latest news, download patient information and take action.

We also urge you to read the Frequently Asked Questions document developed by the AMA (<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama1/pub/upload/mm/399/hsr-hr3200-faqs.pdf>). We hope this information will be helpful to you.

Physicians are working to make sure that health system reform meets the needs of patients and the physicians who care for them.

Sincerely,

J. James Rohack, MD, AMA President