

June 26, 2009

IN THIS REPORT...

1. AAFP President Testifies before Congress on Health Reform
2. AAFP President-Elect Addresses Health Care Town Hall
3. Former AAFP President Participates in White House Forum on Health Reform
4. Senate HELP Adjourns Health Care Debate
5. FamMedPAC Supports Legislators Crucial to Health Care Debate
6. Grassroots Activities Continue to Accelerate
7. President Signs FDA Regulation of Tobacco Into Law
8. Of Interest to Family Physicians...
 - Business Week Features Importance of Primary Care

NEXT WEEK IN WASHINGTON...

* Congress will be in a week-long recess to observe Independence Day.

1. AAFP PRESIDENT EPPERLY TESTIFIES BEFORE TWO HOUSE COMMITTEES

AAFP President Ted Epperly, MD, appeared before the Ways and Means Committee and the Energy and Commerce Committee's Health Subcommittee on Wednesday June 24 and Thursday, June 25, respectively. In his testimony, Dr. Epperly called for health care system reform. "The status quo is not working. We urge Congress to invest in the health care system we want, not the one we have," he testified.

Dr. Epperly described the health reform draft authored by the three House committees was described as going a long way toward providing quality, affordable health care coverage for everyone in the US and highlighting efforts to improve primary care. According to Epperly, "(s)implify paying for more of the same fragmented, uncoordinated, procedure-based health care will not make us healthier and will not begin to control health care costs."

He emphasized that primary care is the key to reforming the health care system and praised the committees for including the "patient-centered medical home;" emphasizing cognitive clinical decision-making rather than procedures; aligning incentives to embrace value over volume; and, taking steps to ensure the adequacy of the primary care workforce.

He noted the bold, appropriate steps in the draft to remedy the flawed and dysfunctional formula known as the Sustainable Growth Rate (SGR). Dr. Epperly pointed out that "Medicare is a critical component of the US health system and must be stable and predictable for patients and providers. Eliminating the past scoring debt accumulated by this arcane, inexact and clinically irrelevant SGR formula is critical to restoring stability and predictability to this program for our nation's seniors." He supported the establishment of separate expenditure targets that place a greater emphasis on the cognitive clinical decision-making that is the hallmark of primary care.

The testimony applauded the inclusion of a 5-percent bonus for primary care services and up to 10 percent for those services provided in a health professions shortage area. These payments would be provided for services that ensure accessible, continuous, coordinated and comprehensive care. The draft establishes a threshold for this bonus of 50 percent of all services. AAFP estimates that 68 percent of family physicians would qualify. He urged the committees to make the bonus permanent and consider making family physicians automatically eligible for it. In addition, he urged Congress to explore ways that might increase the bonus to 10 percent.

Dr. Epperly concluded by urging the committee to take steps to ensure an adequate primary care physician workforce, which would be equivalent to approximately 45 percent of the physician workforce; to remove the barriers to training in nonhospital settings; and to revise GME funding so that it is derived from all payers, not just Medicare and Medicaid alone.

2. AAFP PRESIDENT-ELECT SPEAKS TO TOWN HALL MEETING ON HEALTH REFORM

On Thursday, June 25, in Washington, DC, Dr. Lori Heim, AAFP President-Elect, spoke to Town Hall Meeting sponsored by the Health Care for American Now organization. To illustrate the importance of health care coverage for all, she told a story of one of her patients admitted to the hospital with extreme hypertension. After he was stabilized, he was in the ICU for three days. In speaking with him, she found out that he had lost his job and did not have health insurance. He did not have any behaviors that brought on or aggravated the hypertension: he was not obese, did not smoke or drink. So the only thing that would help keep the hypertension under control would be medication that would cost pennies, but he didn't have access to it unless there was affordable insurance for him. She knew after she discharged him that he would soon be back in the ER running up a huge bill that was completely unnecessary and suffering pain that avoidable. As a result, unnecessary costs were incurred not because of deliberate neglect but because this patient could not afford the preventive steps that would have avoided expensive hospitalizations.

3. FORMER AAFP PRESIDENT IN DC ON HEALTH REFORM

On Wednesday, June 24, AAFP's 1998-99 President Neil Brooks, MD participated in an ABC news special on health reform with President Obama in the East Room of the White House. Dr. Brooks reported that "President Obama is obviously well aware of the plight of primary care and on several occasions specifically mentioned the necessity of having family physicians in an affordable and high quality system. AAFP has clearly gotten its message across and now we need to see the political will to accomplish what is necessary."

Dr. Brooks also met with his Representative, Joe Courtney (D-CT), a second term Congressman who serves on the Education and Labor Committee. Rep. Courtney has refused the federal employees' medical insurance which is offered to US Representatives unless he can see steps towards universal coverage.

4. SENATE HELP COMMITTEE ADJOURNS HEALTH DEBATE UNTIL AFTER RECESS

The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, which has been debating and amending a draft health care policy overhaul bill, will reconvene July 6 to begin considering long-term care policies and the coverage section of the bill.

5. FAMMEDPAC SUPPORTS SEVERAL HEALTH REFORM LEGISLATORS

The month of June has been the PAC's most successful fundraising month of 2009. More than \$50,000 has been donated to the PAC so far this month. The PAC has received over \$176,000 in donations in 2009. The PAC has made \$214,000 in contributions to 70 candidates and committees in this election cycle.

This week, AAFP staff (and in some cases AAFP President-Elect Lori Heim, MD) attended meetings with the following legislators:

- **Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY)**, who serves on the Senate Finance Committee. Senator Schumer told the representatives of physician groups that pollsters were saying that the American public would see it as a Democratic failure if Congress did not enact health reform. He is concerned that they will not be able to get the support of 60 Senators for health reform. He described his disappointment that the AMA opposed a public plan. Dr. Heim told Sen. Schumer that AAFP supports a public plan option if there are certain conditions. She told him that Medicare may pay less well, but the administrative costs were lower than private insurance. She explained the problem of trying to challenge rejected private insurance claims. He feels there must be a national, voluntary public plan which meets a broad set of "level playing field" rules. He does not think the recently proposed co-op will work. Following the breakfast, a senior staff person from Sen. Schumer's office called the Government Relations office to say that the Senator was impressed with Dr. Heim's comments and that their office would like to work more with AAFP on the health reform issues.
- **Rep. George Miller (D-CA)**, who chairs the House Education and Labor Committee and is a close ally of Speaker Pelosi. Chairman Miller was pleased with the House was able to produce a single bill, but explained that it must now be broken into parts so that the three Committees of jurisdiction can amend the legislation. The Chairman described the crowded conditions of his local county hospital's ER where he took his wife for a sudden rash. He said that they went in at the height of the swine flu scare and saw many "average middle class working folks" there. He thinks that the job losses have left people without insurance in his district with more than 11 percent unemployment. Rep. Miller admitted that he is new to the complex issues around health care. He is optimistic that the House will stay on their time line.
- **Rep. Mike Ross (D-AR)**, who serves on the Health Subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. Rep. Ross is also the Chair of the Blue Dog (moderate Democrats) Health Care Task Force. The conversation focused almost exclusively on the "public plan option" health insurance proposal that is expected to be included in the House health care reform legislation. Rep. Ross pointed to the Blue Dog's statement on how they feel a public plan should be structured and calling for the plan not to pay Medicare rates or to require physician participation. Rep. Ross also spoke about the need to increase support for primary care and about finding ways to encourage medical students to choose primary care as their specialty. Rep. Ross is a supporter of full funding for Title VII.
- **Rep. Allen Boyd (D-FL)**, who serves on the House Appropriations Committee and is a member of the Blue Dogs (moderate Democratic) Caucus. The Representative was interested in each group's position on the public plan. Rep. Boyd spoke about the Blue Dog's goal of offsetting any new spending with reductions in current spending, but pointed out that they had agreed to exempt health reform from this "rule." The Blue Dogs will attempt to steer any legislation towards budget neutrality, but he did not feel they would vote against a bill that does not meet this. He does believe that the House will stick to its schedule and produce a bill before the August recess.
- **Rep. Tim Murphy (R-PA)**, a psychologist and a member of the Health Subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. Rep. Murphy is also on the Republican

Health Care Task Force that is drafting a Republican alternative to the Democrats health reform legislation. Dr. Heim was able to spend several minutes in conversation with the Congressman before the event began. The Congressman then asked each group in attendance about their views on the health reform proposals put forth by the House Democrats. He reiterated that the Republicans were opposed to any “public plan option” in the health reform legislation, and that he felt no House Republicans would vote for a bill containing that provision. Dr. Heim spoke about AAFP’s views in support of the public plan, and gave examples of the problems physicians face with private insurance. The need to provide increased support for primary care was also discussed and Dr. Heim spoke about the medical home model of care and the success in North Carolina in reducing costs and improving outcomes under the state’s Medicaid program.

6. GRASSROOTS ARE ENGAGED

Connect for Reform has 2930 members who have signed up to receive alerts and updates. In the most recent alert of June 9, we asked participants to e-mail a message to the offices of their Senators. The goal was to inform the Senators that primary care is the essential component in health care reform and that the legislation under debate in the Senate Committees should include support for primary care. More than 2100 e-mail messages were sent as a result.

Next week, the Connect for Reform campaign will concentrate on how to communicate with legislators during recess, with suggestions of how to contact district offices and schedule appointments with legislators when they are out of Washington.

7. PRESIDENT SIGNS TOBACCO REGULATION LAW

On Monday, June 22, President Obama signed the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act (HR 1256/S 982), which gives the FDA authority to regulate tobacco products. The AAFP has supported this legislative effort for many years. The Senate passed the bill on June 11 on a vote of 79 to 17, and the House followed the next day passing the bill 307 to 97.

8. OF INTEREST TO FAMILY PHYSICIANS...

- Business Week has an interesting article and video explaining the important of primary care to legislators. Go to http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/09_27/b4138034173005.htm .