

Vote for America's HEALTH

For too long, our nation's elected leaders have spent more time discussing the problems with America's health care system than working toward solutions.

America faces important decisions on health care this election year. Many say the U.S. health care system is at a breaking point and that action is needed now more than ever. Although the abilities of America's doctors and the technology available to them are the best in the world, too many people cannot see a doctor when they need to.

Isn't It Time We Focus on Fixing Health Care?



It's Time We Focus on Fixing Health Care.

Your family doctor thinks the time to fix the health care system is now. America's family physicians are committed to improving the health of patients, families and communities. But as the health care system becomes more complicated and expensive, doctors face hard choices about the future of their practices and their patients.

We need to question our political candidates and expect them to have answers. As voting Americans, we need to ask candidates hard questions about how they plan to fix the health care system. And we need to listen carefully to their responses so we can make informed decisions at the polls in November. Together, we can insist that solving this country's health care crisis is on every candidate's agenda regardless of political party. If the American people demand changes to the health care system, our nation's lawmakers must respond.

Together, we can elect the "Health Care Congress" – the Congress that will fix the U.S. health care system.

Guaranteeing Americans Have Health Insurance

Summary

Government figures show that more than 46.6 million Americans – including more than 8 million children – do not have any health insurance. That's one in every seven Americans. Studies confirm that people who do not have health insurance do not receive basic, primary medical care or have a personal physician to detect and treat illness early. As a result, uninsured Americans often do not go to the doctor until their medical condition becomes an emergency. Because they do not receive health care when and where they need it, uninsured Americans are much sicker than those with insurance. In fact, the Institute of Medicine estimates that someone dies every 30 minutes because they don't have insurance.

This Guide educates and informs. The goal of this Guide is to provide factual, nonpartisan information on some of the major issues affecting our health care system, including:

- Guaranteeing Americans Have Health Insurance
- Keeping Good Doctors in Practice
- Providing Care for an Increasing Number of Older Americans
- Educating Tomorrow's Family Doctors
- Using Better Technology for Better Health Care

We hope this Guide helps you learn more about the issues, so you may question those running for office and then make an informed decision at the ballot box.

Where America's Family Physicians Stand

The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) supports a plan to assure health care for everyone. AAFP's current proposal would guarantee basic services and would promote the expectation that every American would have a personal medical "home" – a family doctor who oversees their care.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CANDIDATES

1. How do you think we should change America's health care system to provide coverage to those without insurance?
2. How would those changes be accomplished, and who would pay for it?
3. Do you think having access to affordable health insurance is a right that all Americans should have?

Keeping Good Doctors in Practice

Summary

Across the country, many family physicians are making hard decisions about the future of their medical practices. While committed to their patients, family doctors face several issues that make it difficult to continue caring for them. One is the skyrocketing cost of medical liability insurance. While everyone agrees that a person who suffers a serious complication due to medical error deserves to be fully compensated, out-of-control jury awards for “pain and suffering” are driving up the cost of medical liability insurance. Many family doctors, even those who have never been involved in a malpractice situation, can no longer afford to pay the premiums. In fact, many family physicians who used to deliver babies are either no longer doing so or are moving to states with more manageable insurance rates.

Providing Care for an Increasing Number of Older Americans

Summary

Another issue that affects patients of family physicians is the outmoded way the government pays doctors who treat patients on Medicare. Currently, physicians are paid by the government for each separate service performed for a Medicare patient. The problem with this system is two-fold. First, there are many modern services performed by family physicians that Medicare does not pay for, such as phone and e-mail consultations or preventive care office visits. Second, the current system, which pays a set fee for a given lab test, procedure or imaging service, encourages some doctors to provide more services than are necessary – whether or not these services improve the health of their Medicare patients.

This payment structure has not kept up with the realities of medical practice – where an increasing amount of time is spent on phone or e-mail consultation, and some of the most effective treatments do not require a battery of tests. Because of the outdated system of payment, some family doctors are treating fewer Medicare patients. Nearly one in five family

Where America's Family Physicians Stand

AAFP supports passage of medical liability legislation that provides fully for the care of injured parties, but imposes a cap on payments for “pain and suffering.” AAFP also recommends exploring special “health courts.” Among other things, these are designed to have complaints of malpractice treated quickly, objectively and by judges with experience in medical lawsuits.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CANDIDATES

1. Do you believe medical malpractice lawsuits improve safety or patients' health?
2. Do you support limits on non-economic damages in medical malpractice lawsuits? If so, what amount is reasonable?
3. What alternatives to medical malpractice lawsuits would you support?

physicians is not accepting new patients who rely on Medicare. As an increasing number of baby-boomers receive Medicare, there will be even fewer family doctors available to treat them. It is critical that this issue be addressed now.

Where America's Family Physicians Stand

Congress needs to create a payment system that fairly compensates family physicians for the preventive, diagnostic and primary care they provide to patients who receive Medicare. It also must carefully review the formula it uses to pay physicians for their services and adopt a system in which physicians are paid for the quality of the care they provide, not for the volume of tests they order.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CANDIDATES

1. Are you familiar with the struggles of patients who use the Medicare system, and those of the doctors who treat them?
2. Do you think federal health insurance programs, like Medicare, should pay physicians to help their patients prevent disease and to coordinate their patients' health care services?
3. Should Medicare focus more on physicians helping patients manage chronic diseases like diabetes and hypertension?

Educating Tomorrow's Family Doctors

Summary

Every year, fewer and fewer medical school graduates choose to practice family medicine. Inadequate payment, rising liability insurance premiums and growing student loan debt continue to force an increasing number of medical students to pursue careers in specialty medicine. Yet studies suggest that patients who receive primary care from family doctors ultimately get higher-quality, lower-cost care. Making sure that America has enough highly trained family physicians for the future is especially important, because they provide most of the primary care in rural settings and 90 percent of the medical care in America's 1,000 federally qualified health centers, which are already significantly understaffed.

Where America's Family Physicians Stand

Congress needs to support training programs for future family doctors. The evidence is clear that health care provided on a regular basis by a family physician improves patients' health and lowers costs.

The federal government has a responsibility to promote the training of new family physicians to make sure patients are able to continue to see a doctor when they need to. Thus, it doesn't make sense that the President's 2007 budget includes funding to build 1,200 community health centers, but eliminates funding to train family doctors. And it doesn't make sense that federal regulations have recently cut funding for family medicine residency programs. Congress should support training programs that encourage more medical students to become family physicians.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CANDIDATES

1. How do we increase the number of physicians available to provide needed primary care in the U.S.?
2. Do you support federal financial incentives (like loan forgiveness, deductibility of the interest on student loans) for medical students who choose to pursue family medicine, especially in underserved areas?
3. Do you support federal grants to medical schools and residency programs to train family physicians?

Using Better Technology for Better Health Care

Summary

The advantages of electronic health records (EHRs) were made very clear in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina when, in the midst of the pain and devastation, hospitals, labs and physician offices lost the paper medical records of millions of Gulf Coast residents. As a result, more people now see the value of storing and sharing a patient's medical information (medication histories, test results, diagnoses, etc.) online, so that it may be easily accessed by both patients and health care professionals, especially during an emergency, wherever they are located.

Family physicians have gotten the message. Already about 30 percent of AAFP's members are using an EHR system, and many report that it has revolutionized the way they communicate with patients, check on lab tests and arrange for prescriptions. The greatest barrier

to more doctors using EHRs is the upfront cost to the physician. These systems are expensive, costing as high as \$50,000, which can be out of reach, especially for a small practice. As more physicians use these systems, patients will see better coordination of the health care information among doctors and increased safety.

Where America's Family Physicians Stand

AAFP urges Congress to provide financial incentives to small-to medium-sized practices with limited resources to help them purchase EHR systems. AAFP also supports developing federal standards so that all EHR systems nationwide are compatible, to allow health care providers to be able to transfer a patient's pertinent health information regardless of a patient's location.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CANDIDATES

1. Do you support federal investment in health information technology systems?
2. Would you support grants or small business loans specific to primary care physicians?
3. What privacy protections are necessary for these systems?