



A Rookie Goes to Washington

By Janet Fredal Wyman, M.S.N., A.P.R.N.



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The message has become a constant: we health care professionals need to take a leadership role in advocating for reform in our health care system. In March 2007 at a program cosponsored by the VA Hospital and Michigan Chapter CCAs, **Susan Housholder-Hughes, M.S.N., A.P.R.N.-B.C.**, gave an impassioned speech on professionalism in nursing. She appealed to nurses to become actively involved in the issues and processes of health care, our patients and our profession. At ACC.07 in New Orleans, ACC's President **James Dove, M.D., F.A.C.C.**, echoed similar thoughts in his inaugural address, saying, "The time has come for all of us, young and old, to get involved in this reshaping of our health care system."

When I received the invitation to ACC's Legislative Conference, I found myself thinking of these two entreaties. Health care is mentioned with greater frequency in the news, while cardiovascular disease remains the primary health disease issue in our country. As a cardiovascular nurse practitioner, I felt that it was time to answer the summons and get involved.

Day 1: Learning the Basics

The first day of the conference was a crash course on the hot issues of health care legislation. The most important topic was the flawed Sustainable Growth Rate (SGR) formula used by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to calculate the annual health care provider payment updates. Under the SGR formula, unless Congress acts by this year's end, there will be a 10 percent cut in Medicare reimbursement fees. For practices and institutions with a significant percentage of Medicare patients — which includes mine in downtown Detroit — the cut will have a big impact.

For years, health care professionals have appealed annually to Congress for a reprieve from planned cuts and for corrections to be made to the SGR formula. For the past two years Congress has answered the appeals by holding reimbursement rates to the preceding year. However, the SGR formula remains flawed, and despite inflation, increased overhead costs and the increased chronic health care needs of an aging population, reimbursement remains at the level approved in 2005.

We also reviewed ACC's proactive efforts to identify and promulgate mechanisms that ensure the delivery of high quality, patient-centered care in a cost-conscious manner. For example, when payers and some providers voiced concern over the rapid growth of medical imaging, the ACC began the process of developing appropriateness criteria to define when an imaging modality should or should not be used.

Non-ACC speakers at the Legislative Conference made it clear that ACC's voice is heard on Capitol Hill because of our efforts to ensure quality health care with the appropriateness criteria, performance measures and guidelines, and of course, the ACC's National Cardiovascular Data Registry (NCDR™).

Day 2: On the Hill

On the second day, we went to Capitol Hill to meet with our state representatives. Our job was to deliver our patient-centered quality care message and attempt to educate them about our concerns. Some of the legislative aides we met were appreciative listeners who knew little about health care issues but found our talking points helpful. Others were well versed on their legislator's health care positions and talked of work already done on our behalf.

Carrying Forth the Message

It is baffling to me that the CMS would continue to use a "flawed" SGR formula to determine Medicare reimbursement. Unfortunately, it appears that the SGR will not be fixed soon. Previous attempts to fix it have been unsuccessful, each solution failing to withstand criticism from one group or another.

Why CCAs Should Get Involved

In addition to being skilled clinicians, it is extremely important for nurses to be proactive in the political and legislative arena. Advocating for the patients we serve, promoting public health issues, participating in the development of health care policy and protecting our profession is imperative. The ACC Legislative Conference provides an important forum to learn and discuss the

Before the August recess, the House passed the CHAMP Act, which combined changes to the Medicare physician payment formula with reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). However, the Senate reauthorized SCHIP alone and left Medicare off their bill. It will likely be December before Congress resolves

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the Medicare reimbursement issue, which means we must continue to lobby our representatives for an appropriate solution.

Meanwhile, I will continue to focus on implementing quality initiatives in my professional world, and if a solution to the Medicare problem comes through, I can report that I did my small part in helping to reshape our health care system. I do plan to be involved in the process again next year, and I encourage you to do the same.

Wyman is a nurse practitioner in cardiovascular medicine, Henry Ford Health System, Heart and Vascular Institute, Detroit.

critical issues our professional community faces in its efforts to deliver quality patient care.

After networking and addressing our concerns with lawmakers, I realize now that we need to work together to educate Congress about the critical issues facing our patients and practices both now and in the future.

— Melanie T. Gura, R.N., M.S.N.