

TEMPUS FUGIT!

Tempus fugit! As I write my last President's Page it feels as if I had just written my first one. Indeed, time flies. Throughout the year we discussed some of the major problems facing healthcare today as well as some of their possible solutions.

It is unfortunate but true that little progress has been made with respect to these problems. The solutions to some of the problems we discussed lie solely in the hands of Congress and our Administration. Despite much publicity, despite many promises and protestations of interest, our legislators have failed to solve the issues of tort reform, Medicare reform and Medicaid reform.

Until Congress overcomes the potent influence of the Trial Lawyers' lobby and deals with tort reform on a national basis, the professional liability insurance crisis will continue to wax and we shall continue to see an exodus of physicians from many areas of the United States as well as from the profession itself. The consequences of Congress' failure to address this issue vigorously may lead to the unavailability of certain high-risk specialties such as obstetrics, neonatology, neurosurgery and orthopedic surgery in many areas of the United States.

Rational Medicare reform is terminally ill because Republicans, Democrats and the Administration have divergent views on how to approach the issue. Patient-Bill-of-Rights legislation appears to be a victim of late-term abortion, politically speaking.

Healthcare costs are rising annually in double-digit percentages. Health insurance premiums are increasing similarly. The number of uninsured Americans is rising rapidly as employers and insurers attempt to shift the cost increases to their employees and subscribers in the form of higher employee premium shares and higher subscriber co-pays and deductibles. As a result, more Americans opt not to carry health insurance.

Many senior citizens still have to choose between buying food and medications. It is unlikely that Congress will pass rational Medicare drug benefit legislation that this nation can actually afford.

A costly and vexing war and the approaching election year hold the attention of our legislators and the Administration to the point of legislative paralysis. The highly touted "explosive" recovery of the economy is in fact a slow convalescence with job creation lagging well behind expectations.

The Medicare administration has already announced its holiday present for physicians: a 4.5% reduction in payments for professional services in 2004. Whether Congress will again come up with a magnanimous 1.6% increase instead of the reduction remains to be seen.

Undaunted by the many examples of failed or failing national health coverage schemes, some of our presidential candidates are still touting a single-payer, universal coverage

healthcare system. We simply cannot afford such a behemoth of bureaucracy and inefficiency. Unlike Canada, we would not have another country to run to in order to obtain good healthcare.

While the outlook appears guarded at best, there are some positive developments.

Nationally, consumer-directed health plans are gaining popularity. Such plans appear to be able to reduce healthcare costs, although it is rather early to make that statement. Even a reduction in the magnitude of the increase in healthcare costs would be welcome.

Large employers, in cooperation with prominent health plans, are again looking at outcomes and cost-effectiveness of treatment. Several trial programs have been established in which physicians are rewarded for high quality care in a cost-effective manner. Expansion of these programs is expected in 2004.

On the home front, I am pleased to report that our new Pictorial Referral Directory that will replace our membership directory is in its final stages of completion by Mr. Mitten and his staff, and will be published early next year.

I had hoped that my last President's Page would be able to praise the progress healthcare had made in the political and strategic arenas during 2003. Instead, I must pass to Dr. Updegraff the same bundle of problems I received from my predecessor.

As the holiday season and year's end approach, I must express my deep appreciation to our military personnel who are stationed in the far corners of this Earth and who risk life and limb each and every day they are on assignment abroad. Among them are many colleagues, nurses and paramedical personnel, and we pray for the safe return of all of them.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues on the Board of Directors, my fellow officers of MCMS, and the staff of the Society for their support throughout the past year, and I hope that the year 2004 will bring about some solutions for the vexing problems of healthcare. I would also like to invite our members to take an active part in the affairs of the Society and enlist others to join our ranks. It is imperative that we as physicians stand together and speak with one voice in our endeavor to repair and restructure our healthcare system.

I wish all of you a happy and healthy holiday season and a better 2004.

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President