

## **Be Careful What You Wish For!**

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This is a statement that the people of the United States should take seriously. The turmoil in Iraq and the political forces levied against present policy have taken the heat off of Medicare for the past few years. We have been able to delay the cuts in physician reimbursement but we have not gotten any relief in the way of increased payments. Politicians manipulate the truth about the cuts. By reversing the cuts, Congress has given us an “increase” over what we had been allotted in the budget.

The present race for the White House has started very early. The odds are that the Democrats will prevail primarily due to the backlash on the war in Iraq that is costing billions of dollars and thousands of lives. Unfortunately, the war is unconventional and the enemy is difficult to identify.

The Democratic policy makers are now turning their efforts to health care and it appears all are calling for national health insurance. I have to admit that to some extent having one provider and one set of rules would simplify some things greatly. The number of insurance companies that would be eliminated would be a great deal of the work force and what would we do to build tall buildings and give CEOs million dollar bonuses?

We do need health care reform but it will take a concerted effort of physicians, hospitals, and politicians to correct the issues. The issues then must be understood and accepted by the masses in order for change to occur.

The cost of “cradle to grave coverage” will cost at least 10 - 20 % of our gross income in all likelihood. Judging from the past, I would imagine this will be paid for by most individuals making over \$60,000 a year and for higher wage earners the ticket will be prorated higher.

National health insurance sounds just wonderful to the masses but be careful what you ask for. We have an example of, what more than likely will be, the general model that we recognize as a VA system. The costs are going to be high and the care limiting. We all have heard about the recent VA problems. I am sure that Congress will correct the problems quickly, but at what cost? In the 80's, a government study suggested that closing the VA system and providing first dollar coverage to all veterans in the private sector would be a more economically sound alternative. The veterans objected so much that the proposal never made it to the floor for debate.

Here in lies the real conflict in national health care, the limitation of care. The majority of the people of the United States are now used to being able to access care when they want the care. They call and want to be seen. They want their needs met as soon as possible. When hospitalized, they often demand to have aggressive care even when care is futile. Unfortunately, for national health care to survive, it must limit care. In Europe age factors limit individuals from common procedures and treatments now thought of as

standard of care in the United States. The backlash of political pressure will cause conflict that will push the costs higher or lead to a two-tiered system. This model will cost more just to obtain better access to care.

What can be done? The answer is not at all clear. We will need more physicians, a problem we already exhibit. The cost to train physicians will increase and obtaining the patient base and instructors to train them will be no easy task. To get more physicians in the pipeline, we will have to come to some understanding about tort reform. This will be a formidable task because of the trial lawyers lobby and the political pressure they supply. Non-partisan dialog must address issues that politically are not favorable. Futile care, limiting medications, age related issues all must be addressed. Looking at the administrative structure of medicine will be paramount. The cost of record keeping and billing difficulties are formidable. Oversight problems will cost billions and markedly increase the non-reimbursable expenses. One of the hidden issues, not considered, is the fact that if physicians are not paid; the secondary effect on the employees' wages, insurance, and retirement benefits will affect the economy. The unemployment of individuals working in medical fields could be significant. Many female workers are making second incomes that allow a higher standard of living for couples. Many single mothers also depend on benefits obtained through employment.

All of these issues will require significant physician input. Communication and involvement will be required. We must not standby and allow bureaucrats to shape our profession. What do you as a practicing physician see? How are you going to get your message to the politicians? You must find someone to support. You must become involved with that individual financially and more importantly, by communicating directly with the representative. Go to events that they attend, shake their hand, know what you want to support, be prepared to make a statement and then back it up with facts.

Lastly, get involved with your Society. Participate. Communicate with your representatives on the board of directors. Come to a meeting and speak your peace. This is your Society – USE IT!

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