

If we do not educate, who will?

Happy New Year to all. I am humbled and honored to serve the members of Maricopa County Medical Society as your 114th president.

I was born and raised in Philadelphia, the 4th of 5 sons raised by my parents. My dad, a sheet metal worker and the oldest of 6 children, left school in the 8th grade to help earn money for his family during the depression. He always exhorted me to “do my best” and I pledge to do the same for the Medical Society this year.

My surgical practice is focused on the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer. Self-employed and in private practice, I experience every day the concerns of many of our membership including increasing overhead, decreasing reimbursement and the loss of control in the day-to-day practice of medicine. It seems to me that it is much harder to stay in private practice than it was twenty years ago. And, it probably is. There has been dramatic change since I first practiced here in 1984 with Jim Berens and Paul Petelin.

The New York Times recently reported that major health insurance companies in the state of New York have been publishing, or are planning to publish, various doctor-rating systems based primarily on the cost of care, not its quality. The intent of course is to steer patients to “lower cost” doctors by reducing deductibles or co-payments for those who patronize them. Unfortunately, insurers seldom disclose their rating systems and there is no guarantee that the cheapest doctors are necessarily the best choice. Physicians in New York contacted Mr. Andrew Cuomo, the NY attorney general, regarding this rating system and have negotiated agreements with the major insurers to make their rating systems fairer to physicians. This intervention was due in large part to the efforts of the New York Medical Society, working in conjunction with the Massachusetts Medical Society in opposing this unfair rating system. The physicians in these states made their voices heard, with meaningful results. Without their input, nothing would have changed.

There are pitfalls from not learning from the past. George Satayana stated that “those who fail to learn the lessons from history are doomed to repeat it.”

As this editorial is being written, physicians across America are facing significant decreases in Medicare reimbursement in 2008. This decrease averages 10% across all specialties. Our Arizona congressman and senators in Washington recently commented that they have not heard from their physician constituents regarding this issue. And based upon an informal poll I conducted in the past few months, I suspect that they are correct -- most physicians have not spent the time to make their voices heard!

Contacting our representatives in Washington has never been easier. It is as simple as clicking on the AMA website, ARMA website or your own specialty society's website and accessing a webpage that contains the necessary information, even a formatted message that you can edit or personalize before electronically forwarding your sentiments to Washington, DC. Imagine, telephone numbers are also provided for the Internet

challenged so an actual telephone call (toll free) can be made to verbally express one's thoughts.

Today, more than ever, the practice of medicine is being threatened by external forces. Unfortunately, it seems to me that physicians as a group are more comfortable complaining about these issues rather than becoming involved and trying to do something about it.

We have become so busy trying to keep our collective heads "above water" so to speak, that our patients complain about not having enough time to speak to their physicians during a scheduled visit. It is no surprise that so many urgent care clinics have opened on street corners and in supermarkets, in direct competition with us. We have a wonderful opportunity to educate our patients every single day regarding these important issues. Patients must be educated to understand the pitfalls of over-managed care, over regulation, decreasing reimbursement and how it personally impacts them and their families. **If we do not educate, who will?** Certainly not the insurance companies. The only people who are educated and trained to practice medicine are physicians. WE have the power. Opting out of a specific insurance plan can be accomplished. If physicians who are unhappy with the reimbursement schedules and limitations in their practices, all individually decided that they have had enough, and opted out, imagine the ramifications.

A document was signed in the city of my birth on July 4, 1776. This document has some powerful statements which I believe are as pertinent today as they were more than 200 years ago. *"All men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government"* ... the document continues, *"But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government and to provide new Guards for their future security."* Think about it.

More than 50% of the medical doctors in Maricopa County do not belong to our Society. The Society offers a wide range of services for doctors who practice in the Phoenix metropolitan area and beyond, but I suspect that these services are one of the best kept secrets. The Society must do a better job informing its members of the services that are available. There is no excuse today for not being informed about happenings in health care. Electronic communication is changing the promulgation of information worldwide. The Medical Society wants to be your source for up-to-the-minute information regarding the practice of medicine in Maricopa County and Arizona. We again ask our entire membership to share their email addresses with the Medical Society. The email addressees will not be shared with anyone. We can then be positioned to inform our membership about important issues. We must also improve services offered to our members. The website mcmsonline.com is being upgraded to be more informative and easier to navigate. We plan to develop a sort of MCMS Weblog where information can be

shared among our members. Hopefully this will serve as a forum for education and information exchange regarding the daily issues which are so important to the practice of medicine.

In the months ahead, the associate executive director of the Society, Mr. Dan Mitten and I have planned a listening tour to visit the medical staffs at various medical centers throughout Maricopa County. We want to inform you of the many services offered by the Society and more importantly want to find out what physicians want from their Medical Society. If you want us to visit your medical staff, let us know.

As Bob Dylan said in his 1964 song,
*“If your time to you is worth saving,
You’d better start swimming
Or you’ll sink like a stone,
For the times they are a changin’”*

No one will speak for us. If we do not raise our voices to educate who will? Get involved! Be heard! Make a difference!

Edward J. Donahue, M.D.
President