

Many Questions & Few Answers

My friends among you know that another piece of man-eating carpet recently attacked me, unfortunately resulting in a distal femur fracture. Orthopedic hardware now probably makes up more than half of my body. I'm musing to myself about the value of recycled titanium after I die. I tell the readers my plight not to elicit sympathy but to explain to you why I was able to stay at home all day watching every minute of the Health Care Summit and subsequent coverage. At this time it is unknown if a comprehensive bill will go through a reconciliation process requiring a simple majority, or if smaller incremental measures will be put forth which both parties can agree upon.

I learned from the Summit that both parties desire coverage for chronically ill patients. How to pay for this is where the parties diverge. The parties disagree on the importance of liability reform; however physicians at the Summit were unified in the critical nature of this issue. Both parties applaud the healthcare system in America and their own Federal Congressional healthcare plan. Both parties speak of structuring reimbursement differently for physicians; yet again disagree on how to do so. Both parties recognize the financial unsustainability of Medicare and Medicaid, but are unclear on a new system. Both parties desire greater competition, cost reduction, and greater fiscal accountability and monitoring of health care insurance companies; how this will be accomplished through federal and state oversight is contentious. Everyone agreed that insurance companies clearly have a greater influence in medical decision-making than physicians. Simplifying medical care, especially in the chronically ill patient, and improved coordination of care was seen as a cost saving measure. Preventing medical errors is a value both parties talked about as well as decreasing medical operating costs. All of this discussion continues to be couched in the background of an enormous federal budget deficit and the current financial crisis, making every decision difficult and often partisan.

President Obama spoke during the Summit of insurance reforms and regulating the insurance market. For the patient, out-of-pocket expenses would be capped and more patients with pre-existing conditions would be covered. This could happen as small businesses and individuals would be part of an "exchange" or larger group with minimum medical benefits. He spoke of purchasing insurance across state lines to stimulate competition to lower costs. He spoke of reducing medical errors and liability reform but he stated he does not support caps on liability. The President spoke of people who have income greater than \$200,000 per year helping to fund the Medicare pool and companies with 750 or more employees "must pony up." He mentioned tax credits to small businesses and self-employed individuals to buy into the pool or exchange. He maintained he was trying to seek common values and opinions but admitted this might not be possible.

All of the above is certainly **not all-inclusive** of the Health Care Summit discussion and the subsequent flurry of comments on every news channel. However, three basic questions continue to appear over and over:

1. Who should be covered?
2. How do we pay for it?
3. How do we rein in escalating health care costs?

I found that the viewer emails on the news stations to be revealing and insightful. Viewers suggested that Congress should lose their own coverage until all of this is solved or that Congress should be covered under the same proposed National Plan. Neither of these two scenarios will happen, but viewers clearly wanted both sides to end posturing, work together, and stop the inertia.

Where is this all headed and when will it end? If a final bill is passed, apparently the revisions and amendments begin. At the time of this writing there are many questions and few answers. I do strongly encourage all of us to email or write our Congress members on a continuing basis, not just once. And let organized medicine also hear our opinions. I am still hopeful that we can improve our health care system. I know physicians are intelligent, thoughtful and concerned individuals. But one thing we should not be is silent!

Thanks for your dedication as always to our patients,

Susan M. Whitely, MD

President

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