

Reexamining the health care system

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Newspapers, television journalists and blogs nationwide have caught up to what many physicians have understood for a very long time: The system in which we work and teach is broken. Instead of being held together with glue and baling wire, the system demands a substantial overhaul and a new direction. Whether through proposals by presidential candidates or in the Wisconsin Legislature, reform will be the major focus of social legislation in the future.

Many health reform writers are citing Winston Churchill who said, “Americans can always be counted on to do the right thing... after they have exhausted all other possibilities.” We are exhausting not only the possibilities for health reform, but we are also exhausting our patients, our society, and ourselves.

Health care in Wisconsin is organized very differently from most other parts of the country and, thus, carries with it some new and exciting possibilities. We have many of the elements that are required for improving quality and cost and access. We have wide distribution of electronic health records in the large groups that make up the majority of providers in the state. We have reasonably good distribution of physicians to match the needs of populations of patients. Through the 2 medical schools in Wisconsin, we have resources to train physicians for the state and funds—through the Wisconsin Partnership Fund For a Healthy Future (University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health) and a Healthier

Wisconsin Partnership Program (Medical College of Wisconsin)—to partner with communities to address major health problems facing the state. We are slowly closing the gap in caring for the uninsured, even as the numbers of uninsured are growing. There is a history in the state of collaboration and cooperation—certainly relative to most other parts of the country. Yet reform feels as stuck here as it does throughout the United States. All these positive aspects of our state are in jeopardy and there are enormous challenges to cost, access, workforce and quality.

During this election year, Wisconsin Medical Society President Steven Bergin, MD, has chosen to focus on the issue of health system reform. During his inaugural speech in April, Dr Bergin said, “As patient advocates, Wisconsin physicians have a particular stake in finding viable and effective approaches in providing access to coverage, controlling system costs and providing efficient, well-coordinated quality care.” He went on to acknowledge that there are no simple solutions, “but if we as physicians are to have any credibility with the patients we serve, we must take up the charge and stay the course.”

Together with Dr Bergin, the *Wisconsin Medical Journal* is seeking to emphasize ideas and approaches to health system reform in our December issue. We hope to include articles that describe new models of care, point to some of the essential economic and organizational challenges for medicine in this state and country, and get all of us

looking forward to a better system for our communities. We encourage anyone who would like to have a manuscript considered for this issue to submit it by August 15, 2008 to wmj@wismed.org.

In addition to the *Journal* issue on health system reform, the Society is asking many of us to work on defining, from the point of view of Wisconsin physicians, the elements of the system we are trying to create. A survey of 2500 randomly selected Wisconsin physicians is currently being conducted to determine attitudes regarding the basic principles involved in achieving health care reform in Wisconsin. It was developed through a partnership between the Wisconsin Medical Society and the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health (UWSMPH), with additional support from the Wisconsin chapter of the American College of Physicians. We strongly encourage everyone who received a copy to complete and return it. Then in June, following the completion of the mailed survey, every physician will have the opportunity to complete an interactive Web site survey utilizing the same format.

Each of us has a point of view that needs to be included. If we continue to argue about “the” correct solution, we will never get to “a” correct solution. Time is running out quickly, and if we don’t act, there will be NO solution. Become part of the conversation and by this time next year, hopefully we will be well on our way to the “Right” thing, for Wisconsin at least.

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