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Medicare win in Congress shows power of physician voice

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Congress's action to override President Bush's veto of HR 6331—the legislation preventing a 10.6 percent cut for physician Medicare reimbursement—shows how powerful the physicians' voice can be. It also reveals a disturbing corollary: physicians often only use their voice when a crisis arises, such as the Medicare issue, the state's raid on the Injured Patients and Families Compensation Fund, or the Supreme Court overturning the old cap on noneconomic damages in medical liability cases.

As recently as the end of June, conventional wisdom was that HR 6331 would not get enough votes to survive a procedural move to kill the bill in the US Senate. But the AMA's savvy combination of grassroots efforts and airing television ads in districts where senators face difficult reelection campaigns dovetailed perfectly with Sen Ted Kennedy's appearance on the Senate floor for a key vote. The confluence of physician effort and raw politics gave Medicare patients and their physicians the biggest win in years.

Unfortunately, the HR 6331 example is more the exception than the rule.

Physicians can do a better job of informing our policymakers on what's important, and how decisions made in the state and national capitols can dramatically influence how health care is practiced. One way is simple "grassroots" advocacy—having a critical number of physicians

contacting legislators and others on a specific issue. It only takes a handful of phone calls to a state legislator to bring an issue to the forefront. The Wisconsin Medical Society has a "Key Contact" program to assist in this area—the Society's Government Relations team alerts physicians who are Key Contacts when grassroots efforts on an issue are timely. More information on this member program is available on the Society's Web site, www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org.

Although the Key Contact program makes it easier for physicians to help educate policymakers, many of us still don't take the time to make the necessary contact. Physicians often fall into the trap of believing that the "right thing" will simply naturally happen on an issue in the Capitol; after all, once all the facts and data are examined, aren't the conclusions simple? Unfortunately, policy-making—especially in the health care arena—is far from simplistic. Most legislators do not have the depth of knowledge on the day-to-day provision of health care that we physicians understand, therefore confusing what physicians may see as "easy" conclusions.

Grassroots efforts are important, but are just part of the political scene. Political contributions—both in money and time—also alert policymakers that physicians are paying attention and need to be heard. This is another area where many physicians are uncomfortable: legislators shouldn't make their decisions based on who gave them money, should

they? In reality, 21st century political campaigning in this country requires candidates to have dollars to spend on media advertising for election or reelection—the days of former US Senator William Proxmire spending less than 5 figures on a campaign are over. The math becomes simple: without a campaign war chest, a person will not likely have the opportunity to represent constituents in Madison or Washington, DC. Therefore, it is only natural that a candidate has a more generous ear for those who have made the investment to help a candidate win a political office.

The Wisconsin Medical Society has worked to enhance this area, providing an easy way for physicians to contribute to candidates: WISMedPAC and WISMedDIRECT programs. More information about both programs are on the Society's Web site, but in a nutshell they are organized methods to amplify the message that physicians pay attention to politics and policy.

This November's elections are likely historic, both in Wisconsin and nationally. Health care is a top issue. Physicians are a well-trusted group, but we have yet to maximize our potential for influence. As a physician who cares about your patients and about the health care system, please consider being a Society Key Contact, giving to WISMedPAC and starting your own WISMedDIRECT political contribution account. Let's not wait for the next crisis; instead, we can help prevent a crisis from happening by getting involved today.

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