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Your Profession

Health system reform needed now

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In the last issue of the *Wisconsin Medical Journal*, a study by Getzin et al reported that the vast majority (70%) of Wisconsin physicians are concerned about the nation's health system and believe reform is needed. The findings are from a survey conducted last year by the University of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Medical Society (Society).¹ Although there was a diverse response as to how our current system should be reformed, there was broad agreement that all Americans should have health insurance—to be obtained from an employer, a private plan, or another source, with subsidies if needed to make coverage affordable. More than 90% of physicians indicated that the government should bear some degree of responsibility to ensure all patients have access to high-quality, affordable health care.

A few days later, the *New England Journal of Medicine* published similar findings from a survey of physicians nationwide.² Conducted by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation from June to early September 2009, the survey indicated that over 60% of physicians support proposals to expand health care coverage that include both public and private insurance options. Similarly, nearly 60% support expanding Medicare eligibility to those between the ages of 55 and 64, while just over 27% of physicians support a new program that does not include a public option and instead provides subsidies for low-income

people to purchase private insurance. In all areas of the county, the majority of physicians supported a combination of public and private options.

The findings from these studies echo what the members of the American Medical Association (AMA) and the Society have thought for a long time—meaningful health system reform is needed, now.

Wisconsin has an excellent track record of providing high-quality, cost-efficient care. In fact, the Agency for Healthcare Quality and Research ranked Wisconsin No. 1 in health care quality. But as physicians, we see every day the problems with our health care system: patients in our emergency departments who don't seek preventive care because they lack health insurance and those who aren't covered because of pre-existing medical conditions. And we know how difficult it is to treat our patients covered by Medicare and Medicaid when reimbursement rates are a fraction of our costs. The list goes on.

As reform proposals are being debated, the AMA and the Society are at the table, ensuring that the collective voice of physicians is heard by Congress and the President.

The AMA has identified the following 7 elements as necessary to any reform plan:

- Health insurance coverage for all Americans
- Insurance market reforms that expand choice of affordable coverage and eliminate denials for pre-existing conditions
- Assurance that health care decisions will remain in the hands of patients and their physicians, not insurance companies or govern-

ment officials

- Investments and incentives for quality improvement, prevention, and wellness initiatives
- Repeal of the Medicare physician payment formula that would trigger steep cuts and threaten seniors' access to care
- Implementation of medical liability reforms to reduce the cost of defensive medicine
- Streamlining and standardizing of insurance claims processing requirements to eliminate unnecessary costs and administrative burdens

WISCONSIN CARE, a health reform plan developed by the Society in 1992 and updated in 2002, shares similar goals.³

We know status quo is unacceptable. As the health care debate continues in Washington, it's crucial that we advocate for our patients by calling on our Congressional delegation to find common ground on ideas that offer real improvements. Together we can shape the future of health care. Together we are stronger.

References

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Doctor Hetsko is a Member of the American Medical Association Board of Trustees and a Past President of the Wisconsin Medical Society.

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