Editor’s Note: Thomas J. Luetzow, MD, FACEP, was sworn in as the 157th president of the Wisconsin Medical Society on April 16. Below is the text of his inaugural speech.

I want to thank you for the honor and the privilege to serve you as president of the Wisconsin Medical Society.

My presidential focus for the coming year is physicians as patient advocates.

Webster’s definition of advocacy is: to support something; to uphold; to press for; to promote; to speak out for; to champion; to defend. I believe advocacy is at the core of who we are as physicians. It is the essence of professionalism—putting someone else’s interests before your own. It’s not always easy, but it is always important.

With the recent signing of health care system reform legislation, health care reform will truly change. It will take awhile to determine what the final product is. At 2700 plus pages, can any one person grasp all the provisions within? Even the summaries I’ve reviewed are onerous. No doubt there will be surprises. And we, as patient advocates, will need to investigate, identify and promote solutions that help our patients.

There’s an ancient Chinese curse that states: “May you live in interesting times.” I’m not sure I can tolerate anything more interesting than the times we are living in now, but we certainly have plenty to advocate for. Other issues we face include the following:

- Professionalism—Despite challenges, we need to maintain the high standards we have set.
- Collegiality—To be effective advocates, we need to unify across all specialties.
- Quality—Errors must be eliminated and cost has to be reduced without decreasing quality.
- Informatics—Proper, accurate and realistic measures must be created. Efficiency is essential for us to use it effectively. And though it may try our patience—especially mine—it is a discipline we must incorporate into every working day.
- Liability reform—It is essential we, as a nation, find a way to eliminate defensive medicine. I believe health care costs could drop dramatically through reform, such as might include a change to the gross negligence standard, which has already happened in some states.
- Payment—Adequate and appropriate compensation is essential for the recruitment of quality physicians!
- Health worker shortage—Our aging population and aging health care work force will compound this problem. Innovative solutions are necessary. Physician recruitment and retention will be critical to truly fulfilling a patient advocacy agenda.
Some of the Society’s major issues include:
- Viable county societies
- Membership growth, especially young members. I might add that attracting the younger generation will require the Society to embrace all of the new communications technologies so familiar to them.
- Continued financial stability
- Members’ time constraints
- Leadership development

The issues we face can feel overwhelming, but I am confident that by working together we can overcome the challenges before us. And at times, we may have to “buck the system,” putting ourselves at risk to champion our patients’ needs.

I believe what is good for patients is good for physicians; and what is good for physicians is good for patients. This concept can help guide our efforts. Never feel frustrated in your advocacy, and never stop advocating despite the difficulties it may cause.

When I was a resident in the Army, I repeatedly viewed physicians advocating for their patients, often risking their own careers. When I returned to Wisconsin, I again repeatedly witnessed physicians advocating for patients, and I have done my best to emulate these examples. Even though the vast majority of patients never see our efforts on their behalf, when they do, a special bond is created that goes beyond the treatment itself.

I remember early one morning, I saw a man in Room 20 with chest pain. Myocardial infarction was ruled out but symptoms were not fully explained. With a stress test, an additional level of accuracy could be provided.

Unfortunately, it took 8 hours to get the test result back, which was not good for my length of stay data. At about 5 p.m., the patient leaned against the door frame, arms crossed impatiently and asked, “How much longer, doc?” I responded that I was just awaiting the cardiologist’s report. He then asked me when my shift ended. I said 3 p.m. He glanced at the clock, and with a look of embarrassment asked, “Are you here just for me?” I said, “Yes.” He responded quietly, “Thanks, doc.”

I know many of you fight for your patients on a daily basis, and I applaud your example!

Many times we don’t realize that patients do recognize these efforts, but acknowledgment remains unsaid. Two years ago, when I was campaigning for State Assembly, I met many people I had cared for briefly. I did not remember some of them, however, they remembered me, and they thanked me for the care I provided.

The relationship between physician and patient is like no other, and your patients do and will appreciate your efforts. And even if they don’t, you can go home at night knowing you did your job, professionally.

As I reflected on the journey that brought me here tonight, I recalled that it began one morning years ago as I left Mercy Medical Center in Oshkosh. Across the parking lot, a familiar voice called out, “Hey, Tom, you like cars?” I assured him I did. Then he recommended that I join the Society’s Safe Transportation Committee. “Why?” I asked. “Because you can make a difference,” he replied.

I later became Chair of that council and now I stand before you today. I will never forget that encounter with Dr Ken Viste, nor can I thank him.

As a tribute to Dr Viste and his leadership, I direct each of you, my distinguished colleagues, to take the time to recruit physicians to be leaders within both the Wisconsin Medical Society and the medical profession, encouraging them to make a difference as advocates for their patients. We are physician advocates and patient advocacy is job one!

As I was at campaign school, I was told to be able to summarize my comments into one sentence. Tonight, I’d like to leave you with this sentence: We as physicians are and will continue to be the patient advocates!

I want to thank all of you in advance for what is sure to be an interesting year.

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