

Navigating Healthcare Reform

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Healthcare reform is at the top of the agenda for our government. How this plays out will likely determine the direction of medicine for the next decade or longer. Creating a product that will be acceptable- will take a team approach, applying systems theories and the practical application of policies already in place as well as many that are yet to be written. There are diverging views of what to do and how to do it as the players are beginning to line up for possible battle. Is this necessary?

There are common policies we can agree upon and others that will need to be modified so that they can be applied to the practice of medicine, the business of medicine, and patient care. If we start with the areas of common interest, we can develop a foundation from which a strong structure can be created. If we begin on shaky ground, the structure of what is to come will eventually fall, likely hurting many in the process.

There are AMA policies already in place that can help point us in the right direction and represent a place to begin. Before doing so, however, it is important to note that the current administration is focused on ways to change the face of the Affordable Care Act. Some of those changes will not be acceptable, while others will represent a change in the right direction.

The Affordable Care Act was supposed to decrease uncompensated care for medical practices. It is unclear that the expected result was seen by many since there has been very little change in how physicians are paid for their services. The ACA was supposed to reduce paperwork and administrative costs. This also has not been seen by most physician practices. Finally, the ACA looks at ways to standardize medical practices. Can you really standardize the practice of medicine and eliminate the subjective nature of patient care?

One of the biggest issues facing physicians today is burnout. The reason burnout is so detrimental to the profession and to the public is that it has the undesired effect of decreasing the number of physicians in the workforce in a dramatic way. Much of the problem is related to the over burdensome governmental regulations, the decrease in physician autonomy and devaluation of physicians.

What makes physicians so vital to American healthcare? Physicians are caring thinkers. They gain knowledge not only during their training but throughout their careers so that they can extrapolate the unknown. They are more than computer models as they employ all aspects of decision making during each clinical encounter. Each patient visit has unique aspects and each requires the interpretation of data so that decisions can be made. That is the art of medicine and the ability to practice that art is dramatically affected by governmental regulations.

Physicians need relief from regulations imposed by the ACA, MACRA, and Electronic health records. They need relief from insurance restrictions, prior authorizations, and the growing epidemic of narrow networks. Physicians need relief from maintenance of certification and recertification regulations that have never been proven to improve patient care.

The AMA is focused on maintaining insurance coverage for Americans. At first glance this sounds great. However, this begs the question: Does insurance mean that Americans will have healthcare? Based on current information, the high deductible plans and certainly the lower level plans do not necessarily increase patient access as much as intended. The focus should be on helping Americans get the care that they need.

A review of current AMA policies that focus on ways to help physicians provide the best care for their patients include fair payment policies, tort reform, autonomy of medical staff, electronic health record interoperability (but not at the physician's cost), and balance billing. There is also a strong AMA policy against the expansion of the scope of practice of nurse practitioners which should likely include physician's assistants as well.

It is time that we critically evaluate the policies we have, identify which ones need to be improved and what policies may need to be created so that we can effectively advocate for our profession and patients. The new administration's focus on healthcare creates vast opportunities for physicians to participate in the process. Changes are needed so that physicians and all the professionals involved can provide the best care to our patients.