



Letter to the editor: The Pundit Speaks
By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.
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“America's Doctors and Difficult Times”

Today's physicians have to deal with restrictive governmental regulations, miserly reimbursements and insurance control over patient management. National tort and malpractice reform seem to be unachievable goals to control future healthcare costs. Government officials use florid rhetoric to spout noble intentions but citizens realize that government agencies are frequently rife with inefficiencies, fraud, thievery, redundancy, mismanagement and overall incompetence. After all, Congress just passed a 2,000+ page health insurance reform bill into law, which they did not even read. Ironically, "under-treatment" was in the headlines over the past year as the Obama administration and Congress struggled with legislation to provide care to about 35 million who lacked health insurance. But with certainty, the politicians kept Rolls Royce care for themselves and their families and gave "clunker care" to the rest of us. Surveys of doctors are showing growing dissatisfaction with the overall system. A 2009 doctor survey by the Louisiana State Medical Society indicated that 82% felt revenue from their practice was flat or decreasing and 73% indicated that the practice of medicine has become less satisfying in the past decade. This does not bode well for the future of the profession.

In June of 2010, the Associated Press researched hundreds of pages of studies and questioned doctors and specialists concerning the nation's most overused (and perhaps abused) practices. Doctors must be made more aware of the overall costs of unnecessary studies and efforts are being taken to help doctors cut back avoidable care (patients being over studied). Patients are being asked to also consider not pressing doctors for unnecessary studies and to look at different options before choosing one. "Over-treatment" means someone could have fared as well or better with a lesser test or therapy, or maybe even none at all and it is a major contributor to runaway healthcare costs. Dr. Angela Gardner, president of the American College of Emergency Physicians, said, "Fear of malpractice lawsuits has everything to do with it," because emergency physicians face intense pressure to over test in the life-and-death chaos of the emergency room. Many other doctors have somewhat that same feeling.

In the America that I love, we realize that healthcare is going through a current crisis that will likely get worse. We need to be mindful that none of the diagnostic studies are "free" and that the cost of unnecessary CT scans or antibiotics for viral conditions are frequently a major waste of money and time. Some even say that, "Care for the dying is often a powerful illustration of treatment going too far." Patients and doctors alike, must struggle to do the right thing in these difficult times.

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