

Letter by A.Alan Semine, MD, sent to MRS Executive Committee Members in June 2009

The Massachusetts Medical Society hosted a conference call for MMS leadership that included the Presidents of the specialty societies. The purpose of the exercise is for disseminating information regarding health care reform developments at the state and at the federal level. Mario Motta, president of MMS opened the meeting by reporting his impressions of the Annual Meeting of the AMA, at which President Obama spoke. He emphasized that the President was actually well received and that the press was unfair in focusing on a single incident of booing that was the result of banter between the President and the audience regarding tort reform. During the speech, there were 9 standing ovations and 20 occasions of prolonged applause. In short, Mario's impression is that there is a wide base of support at the AMA for working with Congress and the Administration towards reform. That is not to say that there are no concerns. One position that the AMA emphasizes is that any public plan cannot be an extension of Medicare for payment rates. Also, it cannot require mandatory participation by physicians. He did report that there were multiple resolutions submitted that proposed to resist any attempts to implement health care reform but they were consistently defeated.

Charlie Alagero, General Counsel at MMS covered the Physician Payment Reform Commission and the Massachusetts issues. The Commission report will be out in July. The MMS will be pushing for inclusion of tort reform and antitrust changes for the prospect of any reform to be possible. The most important point made was that, after the Commission releases its report, the proposal goes to the legislature and we will have an opportunity to shape it further. He also points out that it will not be reasonable to expect that there will be just one model. Not all providers will be able to adapt to the proposed changes (i.e. bundled payments etc).

Alex Calcagno, lobbyist for MMS at the federal level, reported on the developments in Washington. She reports that the situation is very fluid. There are five committees working on health care reform, two in the Senate and three in the House. The Senate Committees are the Finance Committee, headed by Baucus, and Kennedy's Health Education Labor and Pension Committee. Dodd is at the helm in Kennedy's absence. In the House, there are the Committee on Ways and Means, the Energy and Commerce Committee and the Committee on Education and Labor. All three are working together on a single document.

Kennedy's committee has released the "Affordable Health Choices Act of 2009", 615 pages.

(if you care to explore the OpenCongress Blog with a link to the act itself):
<http://www.opencongress.org/articles/view/1033-Affordable-Health-Choices-Act>

The act has just been released and it is already undergoing revisions and changes. It addresses 6 topics: Coverage, quality, preventive care, workforce, fraud and abuse, and biosimilars.

The Senate Finance Committee continues to work on its version, attempting not to jump the gun by releasing too soon. You can also explore more at the MMS website but you may need to log in for some of the material.

<http://www.massmed.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home6>

The House efforts are very committed to a public plan. They appear to want to build on Medicare.

If all that is not enough, there is the bipartisan plan being developed by former US Senate Majority Leaders Howard Baker, Tom Daschle, Bob Dole, and George Mitchell. Their proposal, just released, includes at least some element of tort reform.

One observation felt to be promising is the fact that, even though the administration emphasizes "pay as you go" for spending measures, it is not insisting on the same for physician payments. There is hope for dealing with SGR.

The more controversial issues now in the limelight are the public health insurance plan, employer mandates, and paying for health care by taxing employee health benefits.

This represents a synopsis of what is taking place.

Alan Semine