

Lawmakers Express Views on Health Reforms

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Contributing Writer

WASHINGTON — Wouldn't reform be nice? That seemed to be the message from politicians speaking at a national advocacy conference sponsored by the American Medical Association.

Democrats and Republicans told politically active physicians about their ideas for addressing problems with Medicare reimbursement, the medical liability system, and, more generally, a health care system that is failing both physicians and patients.

"If our health care system doesn't work for doctors, it doesn't work," said Sen. Hillary Clinton, (D-N.Y.).

"It's fair to say that the AMA and I did not see to eye to eye," said Sen. Clinton, referring to her failed health care reform proposal when she was First Lady. "But it is 12 years later, and we have many of the same problems."

Sen. Clinton may not have been speaking to the friendliest audience, but she drew resounding applause from the physicians when she proposed that Congress stop legislating Medicare reimbursement freezes and replace the sustainable growth rate formula with something better.

Physicians at the meeting heard similar rhetoric from other lawmakers.

"Most of us don't want to go through this annual ritual," said Rep. Nathan Deal (R-Ga.). However, he also said that fixes

are expensive and doctors shouldn't expect them to happen this year.

Rep. Edward Markey (D-Mass.) proposed that Congress form a task force to review the sustainable growth rate over a 2-year period and increase physician reimbursement 5% a year in the interim.

Republicans continue to push for caps on noneconomic damages in medical malpractice lawsuits, an approach supported by states in which similar caps have been linked to slower increases in liability pre-

miums. Democrats oppose caps because caps put limits on legitimate lawsuits.

"Caps don't get to the heart of the problem," said Sen. Clinton. Instead, Congress needs to bridge the gap between liability reform and error-reporting legislation.

She cited the University of Michigan's "Sorry Works!" initiative—a program that encourages doctors and their insurers to be honest when mistakes happen and provide compensation up front to patients and their attorneys—which has cut liabil-

ity costs, freeing up new money to improve systems that can reduce errors.

Democrats and Republicans demonstrated a similar divide on the uninsured.

Rep. Markey said that the government should expand Medicare, Medicaid, and the Federal Employees Health Benefits program to include more of the uninsured.

Rep. Tom Price (R-Ga.) said the last thing government should do is take over the responsibility for providing health care from private entities. ■

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tinuing their dermatology education, Dr. Maloney said. It also means being "committed to staying in a practice in a supervised setting with the dermatologist, and not succumbing to leaving a dermatology practice and moving out into a pseudo-dermatology or spa position."

Janice Chussil, president of the new Nurse Practitioner Society of the Dermatology Nurses' Association, agreed that every nurse practitioner should be working with a board-certified dermatologist. The association is moving forward with plans to create a certification in dermatology training. The certification will not mean that nurse practitioners are qualified to practice dermatology on their own, but that they have passed an exam showing that they have a core body of knowledge in the specialty.

"We hope that the AAD will review our core body of knowledge that we come up with, so we're on the same page," said Ms. Chussil, a nurse practitioner in a dermatology practice in Portland, Ore. Nurses who care for dermatology patients may join the society for free until December 2006, when membership fees begin.

The AAD is planning to launch a major public relations campaign to educate the public about what it means to be a board-certified dermatologist, and how to differentiate care by dermatologists from either physician extenders or nondermatologist physicians, Dr. Pariser said. "The theme is, if you don't see a board-certified dermatologist, buyer beware. You don't know what you're getting." ■

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