

Chairman's Message

As the Chair of MAG's Council on Legislation, I encourage you to read this special edition of News from MAG in some detail. It addresses our priorities for the 2009 legislative session, and it puts a spotlight on MAG's lobbying team. Most importantly, I encourage you to participate in the process.

Michael E. Greene, M.D.

MAG gears up for pivotal 2009 legislative session

It's cliché, but as he prepares for the upcoming legislative session in Georgia, Larry Lanier – MAG's Director of Government Relations – says that it's important to reflect on the past.

“More than one person told me that taking the job as the Medical Association of Georgia's lobbyist would be a bad career move because MAG wanted to pass Certificate of Need reform, and that wasn't going to happen in my lifetime,” recalls Lanier. “But with the support of key members of the General Assembly and Governor Perdue, we did pass a good reform package in 2008.”

The point, he says, is that physicians and patients shouldn't settle for a diminished health care system in the state. Lanier believes that, “The physician community faces some monumental challenges in Georgia...we can either accept what comes our way as fate or we can become advocates for change.”

Lanier says that it's no surprise that MAG has enjoyed two consecutive successful legislative sessions. “Our success starts with great physician leadership that's complimented by a competent staff,” he says. “But the real key to our legislative success is an energized grassroots organization and the trust-based relationships that we've built with our legislative leaders over a long period of time.”

He says that another critical ingredient for success in the legislative arena is a consistent message that's genuine: “It's all about patient care.”

Along with the CON reform, Lanier says 2007 and 2008 “wins” included CMO reform, insurance reform, nearly \$59 million in funding for the state's trauma care system for 2008, the preservation of tort reform, the removal of physician services from the “tax on professional services” plan, a two percent increase in Medicaid funding, and defending physicians on a number of scope of practice bills.

In terms of MAG's legislative priorities for 2009, trauma care will once again be front and center.

“Some 700 Georgians lose their lives each year because of the state's inadequate trauma care system, which is 20 percent higher than the national average,” Lanier says. “That's

just unacceptable, and MAG's going to support legislation that will result in a sustainable funding mechanism that supports an adequate trauma care system in Georgia."

Prompt pay for physicians will be another legislative focus for MAG in 2009, according to Lanier. He says that MAG supported bills to expand Georgia's prompt pay statute to cover all insurance plans in Georgia in each of the last two years, something the organization will advocate again in 2009.

Lanier says that there are several other insurance reform-related bills that have been discussed in the legislature, including a measure that would eliminate the need for prior approval on prescription medications and bills that would require more accountability for the administration of health plans that we support.

"Another problem that MAG will address in the legislative arena is the verification of patient eligibility and retroactive denials," Lanier says. "The health plans should ensure that patient eligibility lists are both current and accurate."

And according to Lanier, an issue that's migrating towards the center of MAG's radar screen is non-physician groups – including pharmacists and nurses – that are seeking to expand their authority to provide flu vaccinations in Georgia.

"We've discussed this issue in detail with various groups," he says. "And we're willing to work with the different stakeholders to develop the best legislative solution for the provision of flu vaccines as long as it's in the best interest of Georgia's patients and patient safety."

Lanier also warns that the two percent increase in the Medicaid physician payment rate that was scheduled to go into effect in 2008 is now in question given state budget cuts.

"This is going to be a real challenge given a state deficit, but we're going to work with the executive branch and the legislature to do everything we can to solidify that increase," he says, adding that Georgia's budget shortfall could be in the neighborhood of \$2 billion by the start of the legislative session in January.

He also says that MAG will be focused on preserving the 2008 Care Management Organization (CMO) reform package that aligned the CMOs with Georgia's insurance code and MAG will be looking for other CMO reform opportunities.

In addition, Lanier says that in 2009, "MAG will support a strong and effective PeachCare program to support children in Georgia and it will be vigilant in protecting the provisions of the 2005 tort reform package."

He also expects to see and support legislation in 2009 that will "appropriately regulate" pharmacy benefit managers and place them under the auspices of the Georgia Insurance Commissioner.

On the other hand, he says, MAG will oppose measures that would inappropriately expand the scope of practice of non-physician practitioners.

And Lanier says that the 800-pound gorilla in the room is the growing uninsured population – something that has widespread implications for the state’s health care system, including uncompensated care for physicians.

“MAG will continue to support much-needed legislation that addresses the 1.7 million medically-uninsured patients in Georgia,” Lanier says. “Like the measure (H.B. 977) that passed in 2008 that helped 500,000 people obtain health insurance in 2008.”

Lanier says that MAG will take an active role in any legislation that would modify the Medical Practice Act to “maintain the best practice environment for Georgia’s physicians and to ensure the best patient safety values and regulations.”

Finally, he says that MAG will engage in any legislation that’s related to tobacco – and MAG will support an increase in the state tobacco tax as a way to reduce tobacco use.

“We’re at an interesting and dangerous crossroads when it comes to our health care system,” Lanier opines. “This is a time when we need to think strategically, to think about what our health care system needs to deliver to our patients in the next five to 20 years and beyond.”

Lanier points out that the Georgia Board for Physician Workforce estimates that Georgia will have a shortage of 1,500 physicians by 2015, a number that’s expected to grow to 2,500 by 2020.

“If those projections hold up, Georgia will be dead last in the physician to patient per capita ratio,” Lanier says. “That’s clearly unacceptable, yet we face that train wreck in the next decade unless we take action now and develop some comprehensive solutions.”

In terms of bottom lines, Lanier says, “This is a time for physicians to come together and work with their patients and each other to preserve the quality of our health care system.”

MAG’s Legislative Priorities (2009)

- Trauma Funding
- Insurance Reform
- Medicaid Issues
- Payment Issues
- CMO Reform
- PeachCare
- Protection of Tort Reform
- Pharmacy Benefit Manager (PBM) Regulation
- Scope of Practice Issues
- Laser Technician Regulation
- Client Billing

The Medically Uninsured
Influenza Vaccine
Medical Practice Act Reform
Tobacco Use

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