

## **HOD delegates to focus on national health care reform at MAG meeting**

The Medical Association of Georgia's (MAG) upcoming House of Delegates (HOD) meeting will feature a special reference committee on national health care reform, and MAG President M. Todd Williamson says that's appropriate.

"It's been a consistent message for me, but I genuinely believe that the practice of medicine is at a crossroads," he says. "As physicians, we simply must take an active role in shaping our future. It is imperative that we be vocal advocates for the rest of 2009 and beyond."

Dr. Williamson explains that MAG decided to take an active role in the national health care debate based on the feedback it received from physicians in the state.

"Remember that more than 90 percent of the physicians we polled said that MAG should take an active role in the health care debate at the national level," Dr. Williamson said of a November 2008 survey that was e-mailed to more than 4,000 member and non-member physicians in the state. "It was clear then, and it's clear now, that physicians in Georgia want to see private sector solutions over expanded government programs."

MAG Executive Director David Cook points out that MAG was the only state medical association to oppose the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act (H.R. 1) given its "comparative effectiveness" provisions.

Additionally, Cook says, MAG was instrumental in forming a coalition of 12 state, specialty and county medical groups that represent more than 50,000 physicians that oppose H.R. 3200 because it contains provisions that could lead to government-run health care.

In the report that he prepared for the HOD meeting, Dr. Williamson says that, "Through much hard work by our physician leaders and staff, the Medical Association of Georgia has established itself as a leading national voice for private sector solutions and an opponent of the primary health system reform bill in Congress, H.R. 3200."

In his report, he also says, "We believe that there are many aspects of the bill that are favorable, such as rebasing the SGR (sustainable growth rate) and promoting primary care physicians. We are, however, decidedly opposed to H.R. 3200 because it contains several provisions that pose a fundamental threat to the practice of medicine and the future of the profession.

"These include the so-called 'public option,' which is viewed as setting the stage for a single-payer system; comparative effectiveness research, which establishes a framework by which government can make coverage decisions in the future and a host of mechanisms by which government could ultimately insert itself into the practice of medicine. H.R. 3200 is a measure that we simply have not been able to support."

Dr. Williamson says that the patient-physician relationship – which he believes is the foundation for the "the best medical care in the world" – is "getting lost" in H.R. 3200.

"In much the same way Medicare was introduced as a health insurance option for seniors some 40 years ago," he predicts, "the so-called 'public option' would become the only option for Americans. Given its size and scale, the federal government would ultimately consume the private marketplace for health insurance."

Of the “comparative effectiveness research” elements that are contained in H.R. 3200, Dr. Williamson says, “We believe that the art of medicine involves applying the science of medicine to patients, one individual at a time. Large controlled clinical trials are invaluable in medical decision-making, but they must be applied in a way that accounts for individual variables.”

Asked why he believes it is imperative for national health care reform to be discussed at the HOD meeting specifically, Dr. Williamson says, “Based on the feedback that I receive from physicians on a daily basis, we would be remiss as MAG leaders if we didn’t discuss this issue at this time in this forum.”

He adds that, “There are a lot of doctors across the state and the country that are looking to MAG for leadership...there’s no doubt in my mind that we are making a difference in this debate.”

Dr. Williamson acknowledges that there isn’t consensus on every front when it comes to national health care reform. He says, “We have an obligation to entertain a variety of perspectives, and the House of Delegates represents the appropriate forum. This is an important part of the democratic process.”

MAG HOD Speaker of the House John Harvey, M.D., adds, “We will present the various aspects of the health care reform legislation that’s under consideration, as well as the positions that MAG has assumed, in an open and transparent and credible way.”

In his HOD report, Dr. Williamson says, “The timing and circumstances of events in 2009 required (MAG) to be nimble. I have been careful to follow our policy and to listen to our members as our positions were developed and implemented. In each instance, I validated our policy positions with the Executive Committee and Board of Directors.”

During the HOD meeting, Dr. Williamson will ask delegates to affirm a number of positions and the following recommendations...

- That MAG support health care reform legislation that promotes individual ownership of health insurance policies.
- That MAG support the rights of patients and physicians to privately contract for medical care in any situation, regardless of third-party payer and without penalty.
- That MAG support increased payments to physicians who practice in primary care specialties.
- That MAG support the concept of the medical home in a manner that is consistent with the AMA’s Joint Principles of the Patient-Centered Medical Home.
- That MAG support an individual’s right to purchase health insurance with tax-free dollars, regardless of employment status.
- That MAG support legislation that provides tax credits and subsidies to individuals who cannot afford to purchase their own health care insurance as a means of promoting individual ownership of private health insurance.
- That MAG support legislation that would require 90 percent of the individuals under 200 percent of the federal poverty level be enrolled in Medicaid or SCHIP before eligibility in those programs is expanded.

- That MAG support the repeal of the sustainable growth rate (SGR) in a manner that eliminates the accumulated cuts and which bases future Medicare payments on the Medical Economic Index.
- That MAG support measures that allow employers to provide employees with defined contributions on a pre-tax basis so they can purchase their own private health insurance in lieu of an employer-sponsored health care plan.
- That MAG oppose any health insurance reform that would include a “public option” (or any legislative “trigger” mechanism that would enact a public option) that would establish or expand the availability of a government-run health care plan to compete with the private sector.
- That MAG reaffirm its position to oppose any statutory mandate that employers provide health insurance benefits to their employees.
- That MAG oppose any statutorily-imposed mandate that individuals secure health insurance.

Dr. Harvey says that MAG will host an educational overview breakfast – “National Health Care Reform: What Are The Facts?” – from 7:30 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. at the Savannah International Trade and Convention Center on Friday, October 16. He says that the “Reference Committee on Health System Reform” will then take place 10:30 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. And following a lunch break, the discussion will continue from 2 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

“We will effectively set the stage for a substantive discussion and deliberate debate by the Reference Committee on Health System Reform by providing this educational forum on national health care reform at the opening breakfast of the House of Delegates meeting,” says Dr. Harvey. “I anticipate and encourage a productive discussion of proposals for health care reform. Of course, the ultimate goal is developing consensus positions.”

Joy Maxey, M.D., who is a pediatrician from Atlanta, will serve as the chair of the Committee on Health System Reform. The vice chair will be John T. (Ted) Perry, M.D., a surgeon from Cartersville. Additional committee members include W. Scott Bohlke, M.D., a family physician from Brooklet; S. William Clark III, M.D., an ophthalmologist from Waycross; Lawrence E. Cooper, M.D., an internist from Atlanta who will be representing the Medical Association of Atlanta; Jacqueline Fincher, M.D., an internist from Thomson who will be representing the Georgia Chapter of the American College of Physicians; Joel E. Higgins, M.D., who has an obstetrics and gynecology practice in Waycross; Charles T. Hopkins Jr., M.D., an orthopedic surgeon from Spalding; Billie Luke Jackson, M.D., a dermatologist from Macon; Cathleen Quillian-Carr, D.O., who has a family practice in Athens and who is representing the Georgia Academy of Family Physicians; and John F. Salazar, M.D., a cardiologist from Augusta. The committee will be staffed by MAG General Counsel and Director of Government Relations Donald J. Palmisano Jr.

Go to [www.mag.org/nationalhealthcarereform](http://www.mag.org/nationalhealthcarereform) for additional information.