Physicians, Lawmakers Discuss the Uninsured

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WASHINGTON — Physicians are increasingly willing to cross party lines on the issue of providing health care to the uninsured, but convincing lawmakers may be their biggest hurdle.

It’s in physicians’ best interest to be involved in the debate over health care reform, Rep. Tom Price, R-Ga., who is an orthopedic surgeon, said at a national advocacy conference sponsored by the American Medical Association.

“What do you think is holding the current health care system together?” Dr. Price asked the audience. “You. It’s the altruism of the physicians that the nation is holding this system together. It’s the only thing holding it together.”

The need to come together to deal with this problem seems to be welling up within organized medicine: “The profession needs a focused and shared vision.” Dr. Price asked the audience.

“Always talk about the patient, even when you are talking about medical liability reform,” said Dr. Charles Anderson, an internist in practice.

Physicians who perform abortions in Michigan are now required to offer women an opportunity to view an ultrasonic image of the fetus if ultrasonic has already been performed or if it will be used during the course of the abortion, according to a new state law. The requirement is part of a recently passed law that expands the state’s informed consent requirements for abortion. Women seeking an abortion can choose to view or decline to view the ultrasonic image. However, the law does not require physicians to perform an ultrasonic that was not already planned at the original version of the legislation died. The law was signed in March by Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm (D) and went into effect on March 24.

Colorectal Ca Screening for Blacks

Despite clinical guidelines calling for early screening for colorectal cancer in African Americans, many African American women haven’t gotten the message, according to the Black Women’s Health Imperative and the National Women’s Health Resource Center. About 6% of African American women over age 45 years reported discussing colorectal cancer with their health care provider at their last visit, according to a recent survey commissioned by the two groups. The women said they didn’t discuss colorectal cancer because they didn’t think they were at risk, their physicians didn’t bring it up, or they didn’t think there was a reason to talk about it. In an effort to increase awareness about the heightened risk that African American women face from colorectal cancer, the groups have launched the “African American Women Dare to Be Aware” campaign. The campaign includes tools such as a risk assessment, a list of colorectal cancer resources, a fact sheet, and questions and answers from an African American oncologist. More information on the campaign is available online at www.blackwomensh.org.

Bill Seeks Consent for Off-Label Rx

A new bill in the California assembly would require physicians and surgeons to get informed consent from their patients before “prescribing, administering, or furnishing” a prescription for off-label use. A failure to adhere to the requirement would be considered a violation of the Medical Practice Act, which means physicians could be charged with a crime. The California Medical Association (CMA) opposes the legislation. In a statement, the CMA said existing law is enough because physicians can be held liable for not disclosing risks. Off-label use often saves lives, the statement said.

The bill would require physicians to specify that a medication is not approved by the FDA if it is used for a purpose other than for which it was approved. The bill was introduced after several California residents died from complications related to surgical procedures.

“Physicians do not have a duty to inform patients of the availability of drugs not approved by the FDA,” said Carla Khayat, CMA’s executive director. “That’s not what the law says. The law says that physicians must inform patients of the availability of any drug that is not FDA-approved.”

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“It’s wonderful to be a member of Congress and talk about the issues of the day. But I do think it’s important at the end of the day to get something done. My experience has been that people want solutions. They want real answers. They’re not looking for 30-second sound bites,” Gov. John Baldacci, D-Maine, said at the meeting. The state’s approach, DrigoChoice, would be tested under the state motto, which is Latin for “We lead.” It was the culmination of a sweeping discussion involving physicians and other stakeholders, he said.

It wasn’t done behind closed doors. It was done out in the open. “If they were going to buy into it, they needed to have some ownership in the process itself,” said Gov. Baldacci.

Physicians may play a more central role in reforming the health care system to provide access to more people, said Dr. Lewin.