

From my perspective

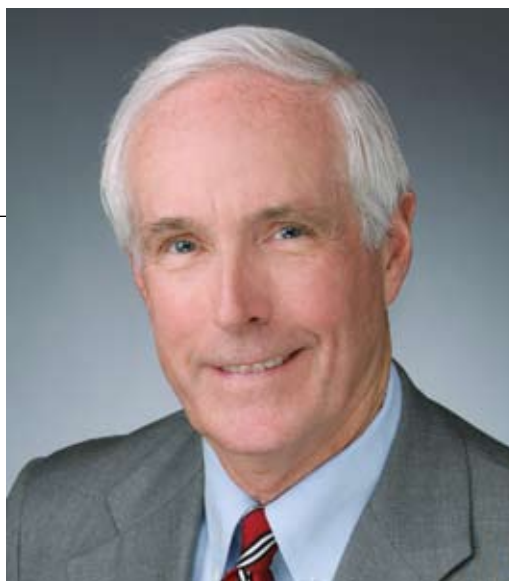
In early June, I participated in the ACS Leadership Conference for Chapter Leaders and Young Surgeons, which is sponsored by our Divisions of Member Services and Advocacy and Health Policy. Since 2003, this meeting has taken place in Washington, DC, and has focused on helping surgeons develop their abilities to resolve conflict, guide the surgical team, negotiate contracts, and so on. The program also has included discussion of congressional activity, providing attendees with an insider's view of the legislative process and how surgeons may influence it. The conference concludes with visits to Capitol Hill.

Throughout this year's meeting, it became increasingly evident to all participants that it is in the best interest of our profession and our surgical patients for the College to continue to become a more active player at the federal level. Speakers, including a congressional scholar and physician members of the House of Representatives, repeatedly emphasized the necessity of surgeon input in shaping equitable and responsible health policies.

What we've done

The College has acknowledged the importance of a presence in Washington, DC, for some time now, having established the Washington Office in 1979. At that time, this branch—what we now know as the Division of Advocacy and Health Policy—had a small staff that was mostly responsible for monitoring and analyzing legislation and educating legislators and regulators about a policy's effect on patient care. Today, the Washington Office comprises five registered lobbyists, three regulatory analysts, a coding expert, several administrative staff, and a political action committee (PAC) manager—all ably led by Cindy Brown, Director of the division.

In addition to expanding our Washington staff, we have sought to become a more potent force in the health system reform debate. Spearheading this effort is the Health Policy Steering Committee, which ACS Regent Josef E. Fischer, MD, FACS, chairs. This committee is charged with identifying public policy issues and concerns that affect surgeons and our patients, prioritizing the issues and identifying the ones that warrant the College's attention, developing action plans to



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address challenges, expanding our mechanisms for informing members and the public about our views, and developing processes for addressing legislative and regulatory issues in a timely and effective manner. This committee has been vitally important in setting the organization's health policy agenda.

To further increase our influence on Capitol Hill, in 2002, the College's Board of Regents agreed to establish the American College of Surgeons Professional Association (ACSPA). Because this organization has a different tax-exemption status than the College, it has had the capability to form a PAC, known as the ACSPA Surgeons-PAC. This group is ably led by Andrew L. Warshaw, MD, FACS, and includes representatives from all of the surgical specialties. The ACSPA SurgeonsPAC contributes to the campaigns of individuals in both political parties whose agenda embraces the need to achieve improvements in and the protection of high-quality care for surgical patients.

Other means that we provide to surgeons seeking to promote sound health care policies in Washington include our e-mail alerts and our Legislative Action Centers for both the federal and state levels. Through these online instruments, surgeons are able to receive timely updates on legislation and to rapidly contact their representatives and senators about the possible effects of the bills on patients and surgical practice.

Plans for the future

All of these initiatives have added to the College's visibility in Washington and have allowed us to play a more active part in efforts to improve health care delivery in this nation. As the federal government continues to grapple with the range of issues related to safe, cost-effective, patient-centered health care delivery, it is imperative that we continue to build upon these successes. Hence, the College intends to launch two more projects aimed at adding value to our advocacy efforts.

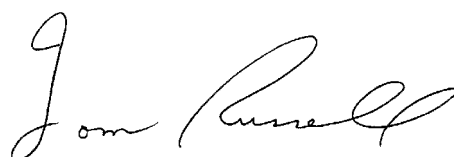
First, efforts are under way to move the Washington Office to a new location near Capitol Hill. Currently, the office is a considerable distance from Capitol Hill and can barely contain our growing staff, let alone the extended surgical community. As a result, we are currently in the planning process to find and secure property within walking distance of Capitol Hill that will best serve the College's needs and allow surgical specialty organizations and affiliated groups to come together under one roof and present a united front in Washington, DC. By having many of the surgical specialties in one central location, we will be better able to unite in addressing the issues facing the surgical profession as a whole. So, in both the literal and figurative sense, we are constructing a house of surgery in Washington, DC.

Second, we are in the process of establishing a Health Policy Research Institute to gather and analyze data on surgeons' practices and the effects of legislation and regulations on how we deliver surgical services to our patients. This institute, which will operate under the direction of a surgeon, will serve as a "think tank" and arm us with the hard facts that we need to bring to the table during our interactions with

health policymakers. Because of cost constraints and quality concerns, these individuals are becoming increasingly interested in receiving statistically sound information to assist them in their decision-making process. Hence, we will be more effective advocates when we have actual numbers to support our claims about the deleterious consequences of payment cuts, the medical liability crisis, and so on.

Given the nature of the work that the Health Policy Research Institute will carry out, I anticipate that this arm of the College will provide interested surgeons and residents with numerous opportunities to participate the newly created ACS Scholars in Residence program. Those young people who want to be exposed to the policymaking process and grow into surgeon leaders would, no doubt, benefit from conducting research under the auspices of this institute.

As the federal government increasingly seeks to develop policies related to health care, the American College of Surgeons will continue to work vigorously to ensure that the voice of surgery and of surgical patients is heard in Washington, DC. As always, we need to hear your suggestions about the direction the College should be taking, and I encourage your involvement in federal advocacy efforts.



Thomas R. Russell, MD, FACS

If you have comments or suggestions about this or other issues, please send them to Dr. Russell at fmp@facs.org.