

PAGING ALL DOCTORS:



Surgery needed
in Congress

by
Andrew L. Warshaw, MD, FACS;
and
Sara Morse,

Manager of Political Affairs,
Division of Advocacy and Health Policy

Earlier this summer, your e-mail inbox was, no doubt, filled with urgent requests from Thomas R. Russell, MD, FACS, Executive Director of the American College of Surgeons, and the ACS Washington Office, asking you to contact your senators regarding the pending legislation to stop the cuts to Medicare physician payments scheduled for implementation over the next two years (a 10.6 percent cut on July 1 and a 5.4 percent cut in 2009).

At first glance, the response was encouraging. As of the Senate vote on June 12, more than 2,000 Fellows contacted their senators, urging their vote for cloture. (At the time this article was written, the fate of the legislation remained uncertain.) Clearly, this is a significant number. A closer look, however, reveals that we are falling far short of our potential. Based on our membership numbers alone, the American College of Surgeons should be leading the charge for the House of Medicine.

Currently, the College counts roughly 45,000 U.S. residents among its members. College databases contain the e-mail addresses for only 35,000 of these members.*

If all 45,000 members not only opened and read these alerts but subsequently took action, the impact would be immediate and impressive. Each Senate office, for example, would receive approximately 900 phone calls from ACS surgeons from their home state. That call would take three minutes of your time, but would contribute to a combined total of approximately 45 hours of live telephone lobbying to each senator from concerned, active constituents.

Rep. Pete Sessions (R) from the 32nd district of Texas (which includes Dallas) explains that communication from constituent advocates is critical to the formation and advancement of legislation: "The voice of constituents is a powerful tool of democracy that influences the halls of Congress on a daily basis. Members of Congress and congressional staff rely on the real-world experience and perspective of constituents in developing and advancing policy initiatives, and every phone call is an important contribution to this process. Through power in numbers, physicians and their patients can bring an issue to the

*If you do not receive electronic communications and would like to provide your e-mail address, please contact the Division of Member Services at ms@facs.org.

forefront of Congress' attention and help bring change for the good of the nation."

Members of the College have intermittently contacted the Washington Office to express dismay over these requests for action. After all, you went through medical school, training, and residency to practice medicine, not to lobby Congress. In fact, you may have joined the College specifically to be represented and protected by the advocacy staff and ACS leadership. Although the staff of the Washington Office does work tirelessly to educate members of Congress and their staff and promote the legislative agenda of surgeons and their patients on Capitol Hill, their work cannot stand alone. No lobbyist can ever be as powerful as the voices of constituent voters raised in unison around an issue.

Providing members with the tools to use their numbers, expertise, and commitment to the betterment of health care and to shape the legislative and regulatory measures taken by the government is the cornerstone of ACS' advocacy efforts. The strength of any effective advocacy program is derived from the activism of the membership as a whole.

It is an absolute reality that Congress plays an active role in the way you practice on a daily basis. The decisions that are made on Capitol Hill directly affect how you treat your patients, the method and rates of compensation for the care you provide, the technology you use, and even the way you manage your office. With the acceptance of this truth must come the determination that you cannot afford to passively allow these decisions to be made without your input. Your understanding of what it means to be a surgeon must change. Providing the finest health care absolutely requires you to be equipped with the latest innovations, superior staff, cutting-edge technology, and best practices; but dedication to passionate and ongoing grassroots advocacy is every bit as essential. Will Rogers put it best in his oft-quoted quip: "Even if you are on the right track, you will get run over if you just sit there."

What can you do?

Respond to alerts. Dr. Russell and the Washington Office staff are sensitive to the preciousness of a surgeon's time and only activate an urgent grassroots alert when issues critical to surgery

face imminent action in Congress. The louder surgery's voice becomes, the greater the chance for substantive and positive reform.

Attend the Joint Surgical Advocacy Conference. Be on the watch for information on the Joint Surgical Advocacy Conference in Spring 2009. Join hundreds of your fellow surgeons at a three-day conference designed to promote and educate constituent physician advocates. In March of this year, approximately 330 surgeons participated in the conference in Washington, DC, and listened to presentations by six members of Congress, including Rep. Fortney "Pete" Stark (D-CA), Chairman of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Health; Rep. Bart Gordon (D-TN), Chairman of the Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health; Rep. Michael Burgess, MD (R-TX); Rep. Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV); Representative Sessions; and Rep. Tom Price, MD, FACS (R-GA). The conference features sessions where participants learn the details of how Congress works, hear from key members of Congress and congressional staff on the status of legislation important to surgery, learn what major changes are on the horizon for health care in the U.S. and how individuals can affect them, and more.

Visit the ACS Federal Action Center. You can learn about and take action on issues pertinent to surgery, read about key legislation that the ACS is working on, find your legislators, and more by visiting <http://www.capitolconnect.com/acspa/>.


Get to know your representatives and senators. The following activities can help a person to get to know his or her congressional representatives:

- Communicate with their offices on a regular basis, not just when you "need something."
- Employ the five-minute advocacy rule each week by spending five minutes calling the health care staff of either your representative or one of your senators, rotating each week so that every year you call each of the three offices 17 times. Note that 50 calls per year multiplied by 45,000 American College of Surgeons Professional Association (ACSPA) members results in 2,250,000 calls to Congress each year!
- Set up in-district delivery of ACSPA-SurgeonsPAC (political action committee) checks (a great way for you to get to know your mem-

ber of Congress or to help foster your existing relationship).

- Schedule a time for your member of Congress and/or his or her staff to tour your office or your hospital to learn more about what surgeons do and how Congress directly affects your practice and your patients.
- Host an in-district fundraiser for fellow surgeons and the greater physician community benefiting your member of Congress.

Individual relationships with members of Congress and their staff are critical to the success of surgery's advocacy efforts on Capitol Hill.

Get involved with your PAC. For more information on the ACSPA-SurgeonsPAC, visit <http://www.facs.org/acspa/index.html> or contact Sara Morse at smorse@facs.org. 

Dr. Warshaw is the W. Gerald Austen Professor of Surgery at Harvard Medical School and surgeon-in-chief and chairman of the department of surgery at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston. He is Treasurer of the College.

