
Surgical groups join effort to call attention to workforce shortage

Surgical groups, led by the American College of Surgeons, along with other key health care stakeholders, have formed Operation Patient Access: Quality Surgical Care for All, an effort to bring into focus the urgent issues facing access to quality surgical care in the U.S. As part of this effort, more than 450 surgeons from around the country met with their elected representatives at the Joint Surgical Advocacy Conference, held March 22–24, to call attention to urgently needed policy changes to address gaps in the availability of quality surgical patient care.

“As policymakers examine how to reform this country’s health care system in the midst

of the current economic crisis, there is a growing concern that the focus on cost controls will dominate discussions and decisions to the extent that access to quality surgical care will be further compromised,” said L. D. Britt, MD, FACS, Chair of the ACS Board of Regents. “Operation Patient Access is designed to help policymakers understand that patient access to quality surgical care is at risk and that we want to work with them to craft workable solutions that address access problems while preserving and improving high-quality surgical care.”

The shortage of general surgeons in the U.S. has been well documented and continues to be a major concern because these

surgeons are mainstays in rural parts of the country and staff trauma centers in urban areas. Operation Patient Access released the following information that shows that the shortage and the resulting gaps in access to care are actually getting worse:

- The American College of Surgeons Health Policy Research Institute issued trend information in a new unpublished report that highlights research indicating the shortage of general surgeons has raised concerns about the access to care for underserved and rapidly aging populations in pockets of both rural and urban areas of the U.S.

- New research published in the March issue of the *Journal of the American College of Surgeons* reveals shortages of qualified surgeons in many regions of Maryland, especially in rural areas. The study states that excessive administrative demands and an aging physician and general population could push these shortages to critical levels over the next 10 years.

“One of the goals of Operation Patient Access is to spur dialogue and build consensus among stakeholders on how best to tackle and solve this problem because this is about making sure patients get the right care at the right time in the right place,” said Thomas Russell, MD, FACS, Executive Director of the American College of Surgeons. Some of

Operation Patient Access partners

American College of Surgeons
American Academy of Ophthalmology
American Academy of Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery
American Association of Neurological Surgeons
American Association of Orthopaedic Surgeons
American College of Osteopathic Surgeons
American Osteopathic Academy of Orthopedics
American Society of Plastic Surgeons
American Urological Association
Congress of Neurological Surgeons
New England Rural Health Round Table
The Society of Thoracic Surgeons
Society for Vascular Surgery
Texas Rural Health Association
Utah Department of Health
Wyoming Health Resources Network

the solutions being discussed by Operation Patient Access are to increase the number of residency programs, expand the National Health Services Corps, establish student loan forgiveness programs, provide more funding for graduate surgical education, reduce liability cost, and implement alternative payment methods for health care.

A key reason that patient groups support Operation Patient Access is to make sure that there are enough well-trained surgeons available to provide quality surgical care to those who need it when they need it.

“Susan G. Komen for the Cure supports the American College of Surgeons and its Operation Patient Access program,” said Diana Rowden, vice-president

of health sciences at Susan G. Komen for the Cure. “Highly trained, experienced surgeons provide the treatment that is the foundation of breast cancer care, resulting in overall quality outcomes for women with breast cancer. These experts can and do provide women with the range of surgical options that are part of a comprehensive individualized treatment plan. A rigorous training program and extensive continuing education ensures that surgeons are qualified and current in their approaches to breast surgery.”

Other areas of surgery in which shortages are developing include orthopaedic surgery, neurosurgery, urology, obstetrics-gynecology, and cardiothoracic surgery.

“We’re facing a situation where 50 percent of the practicing cardiothoracic surgeons in this country are planning on retiring within 10 years, with more than 70 percent following within 13 years,” said John Mayer, MD, FACS, past-president of The Society of Thoracic Surgeons and current chair of the Council on Health Policy and Relationships for the Society. “This issue is compounded by the fact that we aren’t getting enough trainees into our cardiothoracic surgery fellowship programs. Between 2002 and 2007, thoracic surgery has seen a drop of 24 percent in the number of first-year trainees. This is a forbidding harbinger of things to come.”