

From my perspective

As I go about the business of the College, I regularly ask myself, “How can the American College of Surgeons become an even more effective representative of the practicing surgeon who is attempting to provide the best possible patient care?” At this point, I have determined that in order to achieve this goal, we need to concentrate on enhancing our achievements in two distinct areas—education and advocacy.

In terms of education, we plan to offer a broader range of enhanced continuing medical education programs, state-of-the-art skills-based courses, seminars aimed at building the level of surgical competence among all Fellows, and practice management workshops. We anticipate that these programs will provide surgeons with opportunities to attain the expertise they need to deliver the most up-to-date and best possible care.

With regard to advocacy, I believe it is imperative that the College help surgeons influence the system we find ourselves working in today. It is this aspect of the College’s activities that I intend to address in this column.

Importance of advocacy

Our health care system continues to become more complex. Many of the difficulties posed by the current system stem from efforts that were designed to control the escalating health care costs that the nation experienced throughout the late 1980s. For example, managed care proliferated because of the belief that it would help to restrain medical expenses. Initially, managed care did slow rising costs. However, it has now proven less effective in this area, and health care costs have escalated 13 to 15 percent annually for the last few years.

Managed care is just one factor that has complicated our modern health care system. Several federal laws enacted in the last 15 years, such as the Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor Act (EMTALA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), have created a regulatory maze. Additionally, surgeons are facing decreasing payment, a professional liability insurance crisis, workforce issues, the nursing shortage, and the need for systemic health care reform.



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To deal with these multitudinous concerns, the College needs to take a very proactive stance in Washington, DC, and at the state level. Our Division of Advocacy and Health Policy has been working hard to tackle these issues, and the College expends a significant amount of time and money each year on this area. Most recently, we have begun the process of adding staff to the division, so that all of our employees can focus more concentrated attention on their assigned issues.

Ways to improve

Additionally, Fellows of the College, Cynthia Brown, Director of the Division of Advocacy and Health Policy, and I have developed a list of possible steps we may take to enhance and improve our advocacy efforts. A summary of these recommendations follows.

- Reorganize the Washington, DC, office to focus on four areas: regulatory affairs and reimbursement, legislative affairs, state issues, and li-

ation activities with private sector groups and other health care organizations.

- Further the activities of the Health Policy Steering Committee, chaired by Josef E. Fischer, MD, FACS. The committee will meet on a regular basis and establish a more robust agenda to advance the positions of our Fellows. The agenda should be proactive, flexible, and patterned to meet the needs of surgical patients. Members of the committee should accept responsibility for working on specific issues of great concern to surgeons.

- Investigate methods of enhancing communications with our Fellows about advocacy issues at both the state and the federal levels.

- Continue to reach out to other surgical and medical organizations and work jointly with them as appropriate. Alliances with other groups allow us to approach policymakers with a more unified yet diverse range of voices. There is, indeed, "strength in numbers," and, as a result, coalitions provide greater chances of success. Our outreach activities are supported by the regular specialty society meetings that the College hosts. These meetings have been conducted in an effort to bring surgical societies together around broad issues.

- Employ the new capabilities afforded through the establishment of the American College of Surgeons Professional Association (ACSPA). We have begun the process of establishing a political action committee (PAC) through the ACSPA, which we believe will be particularly useful in our efforts to work with legislators to advance causes for all of surgery.

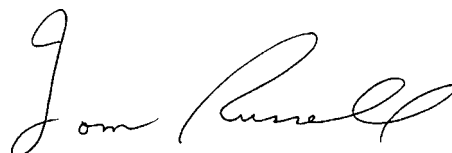
- Groom surgeons to act as leading representatives of the profession in the health policy arena. We are considering the creation of more scholarships and other grant support for individuals who are interested in working with the government. The College also may offer programs aimed at young surgeons to stimulate their interest in socioeconomic issues.

- Continue to develop a network and establish a database of Fellows who have connections with other organizations or politicians who may help to advance the College's agenda.

- Encourage surgeons to develop relationships with their elected officials and encourage them to express their views and expedite communications on important issues by using the ACS Leg-

islative Action Center (<http://capwiz.com/facs/home/>).

The surgical profession has been under considerable stress for more than a decade. It is clear that we must work very hard to change the system if we are to continue to provide the care our patients need. We not only must carry out our work with great professionalism, but must work to develop a delivery system that is conducive to provision of optimal patient care. As this column demonstrates, the College is making a considerable effort to develop concrete methods of bringing about effective systemic change.



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