SECOND OPINIONS

Future will bring better opportunities to build case for universal access

In a recent president's message, Dr. Edwards informs us of an Access Retreat our AAP leadership convened to discuss opportunities for increasing children's health care coverage. (See “Letter from the President,” March 2003 AAP News, page 104.) As an involved AAP member interested primarily in access issues, I read his column with great anticipation to find out what's going on in our Academy's upper echelons on this important issue.

Dr. Edwards writes that the retreat was a huge success, declaring that, "Everyone wanted health insurance for children, and a majority believed a strong case could be made for coverage for all children."

This left me wondering who at the retreat did not believe in universal access for children, a bedrock principle of our organization, and why they were invited to an AAP retreat whose purpose was "to reassess our strategy [concerning universal access]."

I understand the importance of gathering varied opinions, but learning that individuals counseling our leadership had values so diametrically opposed to our organization's made me edgy, to say the least.

Dr. Edwards writes that there was general agreement at the retreat concerning tax credits as a possible solution to the health care abyss our nation finds itself confronting. This would be a major departure from current AAP advocacy efforts, such as MediKids, increasing the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) and opposing the Bush administration's Medicaid "modernization" proposal — and in my opinion deserves a much more public airing than a brief mention in a president's column.

A tax credit to purchase health insurance in the individual (non-group) marketplace is a dubious policy option fraught with dangers for children. Individual health insurers are inherently inefficient, some have administrative costs approaching 40%, and coverage often comes with alarming deductibles and premiums that tax credits hardly offset. The credits themselves would cost the government billions of dollars, and likely would be offset by reductions in other endeavors we support, such as the State Children's Health Insurance Program, FMAP and Medicaid physician reimbursement.

In the individual marketplace, insurers actively exclude chronically ill children, and attempt to insulate themselves from risk using socially questionable policies such as pre-existing condition clauses. The benefit packages are often Spartan, frequently not even covering basic services such as well-child care or immunizations.

For tax credits to be a viable option, government would have to institute major reforms of the individual insurance marketplace. As Dr. Edwards notes, such regulatory zeal is unlikely to be found within the Bush administration.

Dr. Edwards seems to acknowledge some of these concerns when he writes, "As there appears to be no Washington political resolve to provide health care for all children during these next two to three years, we need to look at an incremental interim strategy with steps that can be accomplished in the near term."

While I certainly understand and, in fact, subscribe to our current frustration, I sincerely hope our organization avoids supporting a flawed idea just for the sake of doing something. A few years in the desert seems an attractive alternative to mortgaging our purpose to the political zeitgeist, which in any case seems much more interested in waging war than attending to domestic issues.

There will be future, better opportunities to achieve our goals on the national stage; our leadership should keep this in mind as it considers current policy options. As we are all taught from the first day of medical school: first, do no harm.

Edward A. Pont, M.D., FAAP
Elmhurst, Ill.

For Your Information

Recently posted or published


- The redesigned physicians' Web pages of the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) include a physicians' liserv and the Medicare Physician Fee Schedule, plus an update on CMS policies and regulations, and other features. Go to www.cms.hhs.gov/physicians/.

- Don't Be Guilty of These Errors in Vaccine Storage and Handling, an education sheet based on a training course from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is available from the Immunization Action Coalition at www.immunize.org/carg.dl/p3036.pdf.

- A new domestic violence prevention campaign sponsored by the Family Violence Prevention Fund is aimed at giving school coaches the tools to teach boys that violence against girls is wrong. For information on Coaching Boys Into Men, go to http://endabuse.org/.

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