President’s message on reimbursement could be taken out of context

I read Dr. Johnston’s recent “Letter from the President” (AAP News, Vol. 24, No. 4, April 2004) with great interest. Regarding the care of children under various forms of Medicaid programs, the president states his conclusion “… inadequate reimbursement correlates with inadequate care.” Furthermore, he encourages his fellow members to assist in disseminating his message.

Taken out of context, which could easily happen in this day of sound bites, this phrase indeed appears mercenary and self-serving. As the message will be emanating from a body of individuals that — many of our society suspect — make enough money, it may be misunderstood and misrepresented. It will be both difficult and time-consuming to explain and to defend the example that the president used regarding improved dental services when dental reimbursement increased.

The example regarding the Oklahoma Medicaid program — where “children … are placed on different lists than children covered by private insurance” — is no less than egregious. If this policy is prompted by the medical system, then it is ethical misbehavior. It is difficult to believe that a governmental system would allow the existence of this policy as it accepts federal and state dollars. Let the lawsuit go forth.

If we, as a body of pediatricians, are to be critical of physicians who appear to have a double standard regarding the acceptance of patients — those who have Medicaid, and those who have private insurance — we need to be cautious. There are those in my community who do not accept Medicaid, and this is their prerogative. We, individually, must examine our own attitudes, intentions and behaviors. However, as the metaphor goes, “those who live in glass houses …”

Let us care for the children — “inadequate reimbursement” or not. We are faced with difficult times ahead. The twin issues of allocation of resources and distribution of services are upon us. The Medicaid Program is simply one of the tips of a huge iceberg.

Ferdinand D. Yates Jr., M.D., FAAP
East Amherst, N.Y.