SECOND OPINION

Inadequate reimbursement affects access and quality of care

I am responding to the Letter from the President in the April AAP News. I agree with everything AAP President Carden Johnston, M.D., FAAP, has said. But the problem with inadequate reimbursement correlating with inadequate care goes much, much deeper than he has elaborated in his letter. This is an issue that has affected me quite a lot in my career, and I feel I must comment.

Yes, poor Medicaid reimbursement affects children’s access to care, as Dr. Johnston has said. But I have seen it affect the quality of care even after they have gained access. I have seen Medicaid patients given less time with the physician, less attention and less respect. I may be more aware of this than others because I do not make a distinction based on insurance when I see a patient. It has never affected my salary, and I care too much about individuals to treat them differently based on their insurance. Because I don’t, patients will comment to me, “Dr. X always blows me off; thank you for your attention.” This leads me to believe that Medicaid patients are treated differently by some doctors. When it affects a doctor’s reimbursement, he may choose to not only limit access for certain patients, but he also may choose to limit his time and attention allocated for those patients that he does see. This would further impact the quality of care that those Medicaid patients receive.

However, there are a lot of good doctors out there. I worked for a physician in private practice, and about 25% of the patients were on Medicaid. He did not limit access to these patients because he really cared about them. I was not told to spend less time with the Medicaid patients as I had been in other practices. Unfortunately, he was forced to close his practice because he could not keep up with the overhead. This is another example of how inadequate reimbursement leads to inadequate care; this doctor was no longer available to his patients because poor reimbursement led to the failure of his practice.

And it goes beyond Medicaid. Private insurance companies dictate reimbursement rates regardless of our set fees. Sometimes reimbursement from the insurance companies can be as low as or even lower than Medicaid reimbursement. Even I, who have always had a salaried job or been paid by the hour, am affected by this because the administrators decide that we must see so many patients per unit of time in order to keep the business “running in the black.” Over the years, we are expected to and expect ourselves to see patients faster and faster. We are rushed, so that we don’t run behind. When we are rushed we cannot listen effectively. How can we expect to provide adequate care when we do not have the time to take an adequate history? I know practices in which the pediatrician’s expected workload is 50 to 60 patients per day. Poor reimbursement has forced us to spread ourselves too thin. Some of us still care, working overtime to give the patients what they need. Others don’t care, and shortchange the patients to save ourselves the time or to increase their income.

It is at the point where, if I were to go into private practice, I would not accept insurance; I would accept cash only, and have patients submit their claims to the insurance companies themselves. That is the only way in medicine to actually be paid for services rendered.

Yes, inadequate reimbursement has led to inadequate health care. Beyond the Medicaid issue, we as physicians have had our profession completely railroaded by insurance companies. All I know is, lawyers would never have allowed this to happen to their profession.

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Sculpture commemorates Dr. Sanders’ service to Academy

On May 20, the AAP Board of Directors and AAP staff gathered to thank retiring Executive Director Joe M. Sanders Jr., M.D., FAAP, for his years of service to the Academy by dedicating a sculpture located on the AAP grounds in his name. “Together” was created by artist Dennis Smith, and symbolizes volunteers and staff working together with chapters, committees and sections to forge a strong and united force toward improving the lives of children everywhere.