Pediatricians join legislative fronts

For five pediatricians working in Washington, D.C., a typical day on the job has nothing to do with seeing patients, working in a laboratory or teaching medical students. Instead, they might be writing analyses of President Bush’s new infant mortality initiative or coordinating congressional hearings on access to health care. The pediatricians are on leave from their university practices while they serve as health policy analysts and advisers to U.S. senators.

In their Senate jobs, these pediatricians have a wide range of responsibilities that include: advising their respective senators on the implications of specific health policy initiatives; suggesting and drafting new legislative proposals to address current problems in the health care system; preparing in-depth analyses on issues such as access to health care and immunization funding; and responding to health policy questions and concerns raised by the senators’ constituents.

“Pediatricians bring an additional view to Washington,” said Richard Bucciarelli, M.D., FAAP, chief of neonatology at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Dr. Bucciarelli is currently serving on the staff of Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-W.Va.), chairman of both the Bipartisan Commission on Comprehensive Health Care, better known as the Pepper Commission, and the National Commission on Children. According to Dr. Bucciarelli, the congressional staff members working for the senators “are dealing with extremely complex issues ... and make decisions on the best data available. In the case of child health issues, if we don’t supply the information they need, there is a possibility they might make the wrong decision.”

Each of the pediatricians said public health policy should focus more on the value of preventive medicine which can improve the status of the country’s health and save money in the current era of tight budget constraints.

“What the pediatric community can do is... demonstrate that preventive health care is relatively inexpensive and saves huge amounts of money,” said John Lewy, M.D., FAAP, chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at Tulane University School of Medicine in New Orleans. “Pediatricians are very capable of bringing together the care issue and the cost issue.”

Dr. Lewy is using some of his sabbatical time to work for Sen. John Breaux (D-La.). According to Dr. Lewy, working for a senator from his own state has given him an opportunity to analyze the impact of health care issues such as access to care and infant mortality from both a state and a national perspective.

Fellow hill staffer James Hanson, M.D., FAAP, is working with Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Disability Policy. Much of Dr. Harkin’s work is aimed at gaining congressional approval of a series of preventive health proposals introduced by Sen. Harkin. One of the bills would require every major health bill considered by Congress to include a provision focusing on prevention.

Dr. Harkin said he hopes that pediatricians will help “change the institutional short-term memory of Congress which translates into a desire for immediate results. It takes a while to show that prevention measures really work, but when we are trying to serve more people with fewer dollars, Prevention measures will get us the biggest bang for the buck.”

These pediatricians have come to the nation’s capital because of their interest in national health policy, but their experiences showed them that individual senators also are concerned about health care issues in their respective states.

“Physicians can show their elected representatives and their staff how a specific health care issue impacts the voters in their state,” Joan Venes, M.D., FAAP, said. Dr. Venes is a professor of surgery at the University of Michigan.

Dr. Venes, who is working for the Senate Special Committee on Aging, recommended that pediatricians make contacts directly with congressional staff, as well as with their elected representatives, when visiting Washington.

“Today medical for pediatrics to get involved in public policy issues. Local medical groups have a real impact.”

According to the congressional fellows, working in Washington is only one of a variety of ways for pediatricians to get involved in public health policy.

Utah pediatrician Michael Simmons, M.D., FAAP, said he always wanted to come to Washington to better understand how health policy is formulated. Still, he said, there are many ways physicians can influence public policy without leaving their home states.

“Pediatricians are able to get their

Fellowship programs bring physicians to Capitol Hill

Each year, fellowship programs bring several physicians to Washington to work on Capitol Hill. This year, Michigan pediatrician Joan Venes, M.D., FAAP, and Florida pediatrician John Bucciarelli, M.D., FAAP, are serving in the Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Fellowship Program.

Jim Hanson, M.D., FAAP, of Iowa, is participating in the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation’s public policy fellowship program.

Utah pediatrician Mike Simmons, M.D., FAAP, and Louisiana pediatrician John Lewy, M.D., FAAP, arranged their own fellowships while taking sabbaticals. AAP News Intern Rebecca Lang

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PBS special examines health care

The U.S. health insurance crisis will be the topic of the premiere broadcast of "The Health Quasrterly," a documentary magazine series produced for PBS and hosted by Peter Jennings. A variety of health care reform proposals will be discussed including the AAP plan, "Children First." The AAP plan is a legislative proposal to provide access to care for all children; the health care for U.S. children and pregnant women.

The program is scheduled to air nationally on June 12. Check local PBS listings for date and time in your area.