



**Cavarocchi-Ruscio-Dennis Associates**

# **Health Policy Report**

**March 3, 2008**

**SGIM's Capitol Hill Day Biggest Ever!**

**Members address education, research and reimbursement issues with Members of Congress and their staffs.**

## **Overview**

On February 27, nearly thirty members of SGIM from as far away as California descended on Washington to advocate for positions of importance to the Society and its members. The delegation visited with more than 40 House, Senate and committee offices.

While there were a number of experienced SGIM advocates participating in the events, the majority of participants were having their first experience with visiting the Capitol Hill offices of their senators and representatives. They found the experience to be worthwhile with most expressing a desire to attend again next year.

The program began with dinner on February 26. Dr. Kavita Patel, the Deputy Director of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee's Health Office – and an active SGIM member – discussed with attendees the committee's legislative plans for the year and addressed their questions for well over an hour. SGIM is grateful to Dr. Patel for her contribution to the success of the evening.

On Wednesday, participants convened at the Capitol Hill offices of Cavarocchi-Ruscio-Dennis Associates where they were briefed on the day's schedule, the substantive issues that were being addressed and witnessed a role playing exercise demonstrating a mock congressional meeting. Thanks to "Senator" Mark Liebow for grilling the participants.

SGIM members then fanned out across Capitol Hill, meeting with their representatives' offices, making the case for the reauthorization of Title VII and AHRQ, as well as adequate funding for both those programs. In addition, they address the need to repair the physician reimbursement system that is currently biased against primary care. The messages were well received with many requests for additional information that are currently being addressed.

The growth in SGIM's Capitol Hill Day has been gratifying with attendance increasing from six to nearly 30 in three years. This is consistent with the Council's goal of making every SGIM member an advocate. If you are interested in participating in the future, contact Dr. Patty Harris, whose contact information is at the end of this report.

The second session of the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress is now underway. The President's budget recommendations have been sent to the Hill. Legislation is starting to move. If you require additional information on any of the issues or activities described, the last section of this report contains the contact information for the members of the HPC Executive Committee and staff contacts. Please don't hesitate to ask...and to volunteer.

### **Education Subcommittee Issues**

With the appropriations process in its early stages, Representatives Diana DeGette (D-CO) and Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA) have agreed to circulate a letter urging their colleagues to support an appropriation of at least \$300 million for the Title VII health professions training programs in FY2009. The letter comes only weeks after President Bush called on Congress to terminate federal support for health professions training programs, including training in primary care medicine and dentistry, centers of excellence, health careers opportunity program and area health education centers.

The so-called "Dear Colleague" letter urges House lawmakers to co-sign a letter to the House appropriations committee. Last year, 100 House lawmakers signed a similar letter to the panel

Representatives DeGette and Rodgers plan to submit the letter by March 12, and have encouraged SGIM and other stakeholder organizations to enlist their grassroots to contact their representatives and urge them to co-sign the letter.

SGIM will be sending a CapWiz alert to the membership shortly.

### **Research Subcommittee Issues**

- **AHRQ/Comparative Effectiveness Research Trust Fund:** The President's budget for FY09 reduces funding for AHRQ by about \$9 million, from \$334 million to \$325 million. However, within that total, it retains the current \$30 million funding level for Comparative Effectiveness Research (CER). At the same time, SGIM is working with the House and Senate committees of jurisdiction to seek the authorization of a larger CER program retained within AHRQ. We expect this to be a year-long project at a minimum and will continue to call on SGIM members to support the effort.
- **NIH/CTSA:** The final program level funding for NIH is set in the FY08 Omnibus appropriations bill at \$28.9 billion. Unfortunately, the President's budget for FY09 retains this level with no growth and no recognition of the rate of increase in the Biomedical Research and Development Price Index. This will, of course, put further pressure on the launch of the Clinical and Translational Science Awards in the National Center for Research Resources. The tight funding has already created significant cutbacks in this critical program. SGIM will continue to work with NIH to seek additional funding targeted at this program.
- **VA Research:** Medical and prosthetic research at the VA is currently funded at \$480 million. The President's FY09 budget would retain it at this level. SGIM has joined with a number of advocacy groups to seek an increase to the level of \$550 million. With the pressures on the VA as a result of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the need for making quick and targeted advancements in care and research is axiomatic.
- **Other Priorities:** Among the other priority programs we are monitoring, the President's budget flat-funds the National Center for Minority Health and Health Disparities at NIH. Rural Health programs at HRSA are slashed from \$129 million to \$17 million. Public Health Research at CDC is level funded in the President's budget.

### **Clinical Practice Subcommittee Issues**

- **P4P and SGR:** The Senate Finance Committee is beginning its work on a SGR fix. Advocates are pushing for an 18 month fix with a modest update, so Congress will only consider this issue once in 2008. The PQRI program was extended for all of calendar year 2008 before Congress recessed last year.
- **The RUC:** SGIM is advocating for an expert panel to examine misvalued services to be included in the Medicare package; this provision was included in last year's House passed CHAMP Act. At the January RUC meeting, the issue of confidentiality was raised and will remain an issue as groups like SGIM advocate to make this process more transparent.
- **Medicaid Citizenship Documentation Requirement:** Congress has not yet introduced a fix for this problem this year.
- **Health Information Technology:** Congress has not taken any new action on this issue. Action in the Senate on the Wired for Health Care Quality Act has been stalled because of privacy concerns. Negotiations between the Judiciary Committee and the HELP Committee have begun, but no agreement has been reached.
- **Appropriations Issues:** The President's budget was released in February; in it, he recommended the following funding levels for programs of interest: \$121 million for the National Health Service Corps (- \$3 million from FY 08), \$2.09 billion for Community Health Centers (+ \$27 million), \$9 million for Rural Health Policy Development (+ \$0.2 million) and the elimination of Rural Health Outreach Grants (- \$48 million).

## **Health Policy Executive Committee Contact Information**

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To volunteer to serve on the HPC and its subcommittees, please contact anyone listed above.