

## FROM THE EDITOR

**A Country Divided Over Health Care**

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**T**he US Supreme court passed the historic verdict on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (aka Affordable Care Act, ACA) on June 28, 2012. Chief Justice John Roberts delivered the opinion of the Court with respect to Part III-C, concluding that the individual mandate may be upheld as within Congress's power under the Taxing Clause. This concluded the first step of the journey toward broadening health coverage and holding the health care industry accountable for the quality of care.

The law was signed by President Barack Obama on March 23, 2010, under intense turmoil. Two years later, with upcoming general elections, the country is right back on the emotional roller coaster—this time evenly split with 46% vehemently opposing and 46% supporting the law.

What is interesting about the current health care political climate is the fact that the stories and the conversations are similar to those at the turn of the century with one major difference. Then the opposition was from the American Medical Association and the Republican party. Today the doctors appear largely on the fence or in favor of the law.

At a Medical Care for the Aged rally at Madison Square Garden on May 20, 1962, President Kennedy spelled it out in no uncertain terms:

*The point of the matter is, that the AMA is doing very well in its efforts to stop this bill. And the doctors of New Jersey and of every other state may be opposed to it, but I know that not a single doctor, if this bill is passed, is going to refuse to treat any patient. No one would become a doctor just as a business enterprise, it's a long laborious discipline. We*

*need more of them. We want their help, and gradually we're getting it. The problem however is more complicated because they do not comprehend what we're trying to do. We do not cover doctors bills here, we do not affect the freedom of choice. You can go to any doctor you want. The doctor and you work out your arrangements with him—we talk about his hospital bill. And that's an entirely different matter. And I hope that one by one the doctors of the United States will take the extraordinary step of not merely reading the journals and publications of the AMA because I do not recognize the bill when I hear those descriptions.*

Fast forward 50 years later to President Obama's weekly address to the nation (HHS blog):

*The health law gives hard working, middle-class families the security they deserve. The Affordable Care Act forces insurance companies to play by the rules, prohibiting them from dropping your coverage if you get sick, billing you into bankruptcy through annual or lifetime limits, and, soon, discriminating against anyone with a pre-existing condition. For seniors, the new health care law, the Affordable Care Act, not only means more time with their doctor and important new benefits like free preventive services like cancer screenings and annual wellness visits, but it also means more money in their pocket. The new health care law strengthens Medicare.*

The fundamental question at the turn of the 20th century is the same today: What is the role of the federal government? Is the federal government overstepping its role?

In 1906, the American Associa-

tion of Labor Legislation (AALL) was founded in Wisconsin by economists at the University of Wisconsin. In 1916, the AMA supported a government-run health insurance only to reverse its position in 1920. From the early 1900s, at regular frequency, bills were introduced to set up a national health insurance only to die in committee. President Roosevelt, followed by Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy, supported national health insurance, yet it took about 65 years of intense turmoil and politicking to get the "Mills Bill" passed in the Senate. President Johnson signed Medicare (as part of the Social Security Amendments of 1965) into law on July 30, 1965.

During the last presidential elections, I came across a sign held by a senior supporting the Tea Party at a rally. Her placard screamed, "Government get out of Medicare!" Shortly after the Supreme Court ruling, as I concluded a medical visit with a spry 78-year-old patient of mine, I was reminded, "Now, Doctor, make sure that the government does not interfere in my testing." She was sure that her individual rights would be compromised by the ACA, her taxes would go up, and the world as we know it would end. In an interview with Piers Morgan (CNN), Congresswoman Michelle Bachman played to the same audience: "My 81-year-old grandmother does not need the government dictating her care." What she conveniently did not add was that her 81-year-old grandmother was probably on Medicare, a "government run insurance."

While there is universal skepticism regarding the government's ability to ensure that the health coverage expansion will be efficient and indeed cost effective without com-

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promising quality, collectively we as a nation should take some lessons from history. Forty-seven years after the formation of Medicare, we take federal health insurance for seniors for granted. There is no question in the minds of the public that seniors should have universal health insurance. The path from idea to inception took several decades. Now we should all take a collective national deep breath, and rather than fuel the fire with misinformation, we should look forward to improving our health system.

As we look around us, the lack of physician involvement in the mainstream media debate is startling. Short of Sanjay Gupta and a handful of medical professionals, there are few conversations showcasing physicians and patients. Rather than exploring the issues and helping the public make an informed opinion, the media are focused on the story of divisiveness. The national story, it

would appear, is focused on ideological differences.

While the Internet and Twitter have gone wild with physicians blogging and tweeting about the news, there has been limited coverage in the mainstream media. It would appear based on the polls following the ruling that the country is sharply divided. A few decades ago the AMA was holding rallies to derail Medicare; today there are only a few physicians stories in the mainstream media. It would appear that the real news story is focusing on radical and hyped rhetoric rather than what's happening on the ground. The patient-centered medical home pilots, including the story of rebuilding the health system in New Orleans and the subsequent de-funding of several projects, is all but forgotten. The ACA has in its framework the potential to redesign the health system based on these successful programs. The Medicaid

expansion induces a sense of foreboding and paranoia that is not unexpected: Medicaid has a reputation for inefficiency. However, the successful Medicaid programs, including the Arizona State Medicaid program (Arizona Health Care Cost Containment Program), are not mentioned in the national story as important pilots—probably because of the intense political wars. (And, yes, Arizona is a Republican state).

It is becoming increasingly obvious that if the medical community believes in the Patient Protection & Accountable Care Act, our organizations and physicians should consider taking a stance and explaining to the lay public what the Act is really about and how it impacts them. For primary care physicians, it would appear the time of reckoning is here.

### References

1. <http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/11pdf/11-393c3a2.pdf> *SGIM*