

Health Policy in Medicine: Inside the Beltway

Health Policy Engagement as an Element of Professionalism

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Should clinicians get involved in health policy? Or should this remain the domain of professional health care lobbyists and health policy experts? Of course some clinicians have a strong political affiliation or public policy interest, but most have limited time for political or economic theory, and can be put off by the theatrics sometimes attached to the political process. Nonetheless all clinicians are committed to helping their patients receive the best health care possible, and will be in a position to identify opportunities to accomplish that goal through changes in health care policy.

Economists have long been cautious about the benefits of government action guided by advocacy from organized groups of professionals. For example Adam Smith famously noted “people of the same trade seldom meet together... but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public...” And many physicians have been circumspect about the role of government in medicine. C.H. Mayo noted in 1919 “the government has dabbled in medical affairs at enormous expense for what has been accomplished.” Of course history is rife with examples of self interested groups seeking to, and sometimes succeeding in, exerting political power to achieve special interests contrary to the health and well being of the citizenry at large. Nonetheless, many scholars of health care ethics consider an appropriate engagement in the political process an essential element of professionalism.

The AMA's Code of Medical Ethics notes “a physician shall respect the law and also recognize a responsibility to seek changes in those requirements which are contrary to the best interests of the patient.” (2) Similarly the Code of Ethics for Nurses (ANA) states “the profession of nursing, as represented by associations and their members, is responsible for articulating nursing values, for maintaining the integrity of the profession and its practice, and for shaping social policy.” (3)

In 2002 the Medical Professionalism Project, supported by the American Board of Internal Medicine (ABIM) Foundation, developed [Medical Professionalism in the New Millennium: A Physician Charter](#) in partnership with the [American College of Physicians](#) and the [European Federation of Internal Medicine](#). (4) In this document “social justice” is identified as one of the three fundamental principles of medical professionalism in the 21st Century. “The medical profession must promote justice in the health care system, including the fair distribution of health care resources. Physicians should work actively to eliminate discrimination in health care, whether based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, or any other social category.” Codes of conduct or codes of ethics for other health professionals, including pharmacists, physical therapists, and physician assistants, all contain similar provisions. Thus an engagement with the local political process to advocate for necessary changes to advance patient welfare is a fundamental tenet of professionalism across the clinical disciplines.

The US faces daunting problems of health care cost growth, quality variations, and disparities in geographic and financial access to care. Even the most optimistic advocates for the recently passed Affordable Care Act (ACA) acknowledge much additional work on health policy details will be required. And if the opponents of the ACA should prevail, in Congress or the courts, other health policy initiatives will be required to address these same problems. The insights of real world clinicians busy with patient care will be critical to improving the various government policies that affect patient care, be they the manner of regulation of the health professions, potential threats to public health, enhancements in Veterans health care facilities or community health centers, or better ways to invest in the sciences that guide clinical practice. And of course all health professionals must be concerned about ensuring high quality education for the next generation of their colleagues as well as helping their patients secure access to needed care.

Busy health professionals focused on helping their patients receive the best health care possible will inevitably see opportunities to accomplish that goal through a change in health care policy. Patients and society will benefit when dedicated clinicians are seriously engaged in improving the government policies that affect health care.

In future articles I will note the long history of the regulation of the health professions dating back to the first city states and consider health policy in the US from the colonial era to the recent debates over health care reform. I will look ahead to the challenges facing US health care in the coming years, and the potential opportunities for clinician engagement in the health policy process under the recently passed ACA. My goal is to help clinicians translate their insights from the bedside into real and important improvements in health care policies and fulfill that aspect of their professional obligation to their patients and profession.

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