



From the American Academy
of Family Physicians

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PATIENT'S VOICE IN WASHINGTON

Academy Helps Family Physicians, Patients Learn About Health Care Legislation

In a democracy, informed voters *are* the government. That premise is the driving force behind the enhanced Patient's Voice in Washington, the Academy-sponsored program that distributes information about important health-related issues to AAFP members and their patients.

The program provides a 2-pronged approach to ensuring that patients understand the legislative issues that can affect their health care. The first and new component comprises publication of "Issues in Health Care," an ongoing series of materials about public policy issues of importance to family physicians and their patients. The series' purpose is to inform and stimulate discussion in the community. The second component involves call-to-action alerts on critical legislative initiatives. Both elements rest on helping family physicians help their patients understand that government action can have a direct impact on their lives.

"This enhancement makes the Patient's Voice program so much more vital," said AAFP President Mary Frank, MD, of Mill Valley, Calif. "It makes patients more aware, and they'll start talking to their neighbors about what is going on. That's what grassroots is all about."

Douglas Henley, MD, AAFP executive vice president, agreed. "As the Academy has aggressively worked to enhance its advocacy efforts over the past 3 years, it's only a natural continuum that we look for ways to involve more of our members and, importantly, their patients in this effort," he said.

Family physicians can go to the Patient's Voice in Washington Web site (<http://www.aafp.org/patients-voice.xml>) to download 1-page "Issues in Health Care" information sheets that provide facts about a health care topic and explain why the issue affects everyone, regardless of current insurance, income or health status.

"The Web site has several educational pieces about various health care topics that our members can download and place in their waiting rooms just for information to patients — not with the intent of stimulating messages to Congress, but simply to create better understanding of these important topics by patients," said Henley. The Academy can provide easels that hold the "Issues in Health Care" brochures.

The second prong — the call-to-action alerts — began in February when AAFP asked members and their patients to encourage President Bush to increase pressure on Congress for a medical liability reform law. The impact of such grassroots action through the Patient's Voice in Washington can grow exponentially, said Frank.

"Patients become advocates for what they need in their own health care and for changes in the system that will help their doctors provide high-quality care to them," she said. "When you have each individual speaking out, contacting legislators, talking to neighbors, you develop a synergy, so that 1 plus 1 can equal 3. And with the voice of many, there's a power that moves changes."

"There is nothing quite so persuasive to a member of Congress as lots of messages from constituents back home on an issue," said Henley.

The first 3 Patient's Voice in Washington topics — health care coverage for all, Medicaid, and family medicine training issues — went online early this year. A fourth informational sheet, which discusses the need to steer the health care system toward preventive care and services that help patients avoid complications from chronic conditions, was to be posted in early February. Two other topics will be added this year. Family physicians can check the Web site regularly for additions to the "Issues in Health Care" series.

The Patient's Voice in Washington offers several benefits, said Henley. In addition to providing an avenue by which family physicians and patients can express opinions to lawmakers, the program provides ongoing information about America's health care system and the role of family physicians in that system.

"This brings added value to patient-physician relationships," he added. "It brings more knowledge to our patients, including a better awareness of the Academy, a better informed and more involved member, and better debate and public discourse on important health care issues."

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2005 EXAMINATION DATES AND TEST CENTERS, 2004 PISACANO SCHOLARS

The American Board of Family Medicine (ABFM) will administer its certification/recertification, sports medicine and adolescent medicine examinations exclusively