

7/08/2008 Save our Health Care System

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July 8, 2008

It is easy to be here in Washington and give speeches, all the while making bold predictions and promises, and then turn our backs on the realities right in front of our noses. Congress' failure to meet the July 1 deadline to prevent the scheduled pay cuts for Medicare providers is shameful and our failure to act does have direct consequences.

In my rural, Kansas district, 17 percent of the people I represent are on Medicare, roughly 114,000 people. Many of these citizens live in communities where there are few doctors and few health care choices. If the available doctors stop taking Medicare patients, the health care access for these Kansans will be severely compromised. To prevent the scheduled physician pay cuts from going into effect, I encourage the Senate to take up and pass H.R. 6331, the Medicare Improvement for Patients and Providers Act of 2008 now.

Recently, a family medicine doctor in McPherson, population 13,770, told me of his frustration and disillusionment with our Medicare system.

"It is with mixed emotions that I am writing you to inform you of my intent to leave my Family Medicine practice. I have reached the point where I am no longer willing to expose myself or my family to the risk of having to rely upon an increasingly unreliable (and poor) source of income; specifically Medicare. As a small business with 12 employees I do not have the margin to absorb others' incompetence or our government's capricious reimbursement. I am no longer willing to be a pawn in an ideological chess match in Washington and therefore as of today I will no longer accept new Medicare patients.

I am presently considering a position in an economically booming region, in another state, that is nearly 95% private pay and less than 5% Medicare. What physician worth their salt will continue in a system that undervalues the work they do for a patient population that is the most complex and time demanding.

Congress and the Medicare system are taking advantage of good intentioned physicians who are more interested in caring for patients and upholding and honoring the Hippocratic Oath than lining their pockets. Even now writing this letter to you I feel a sense of guilt as though I am betraying my Medicare patients. I have realized, however, that it is not I that has betrayed the elderly, rather Congress."

When doctors like this close their practices, it creates a gap that is almost impossible for most rural communities to fill.

We in Congress must be sensitive to any responsibility we hold in making physicians want to walk out the hospital doors and never look back. We in Congress need to look closely at our role in these trends and make sure that we are not encouraging this situation by playing politics with people's health care and their lives.

My hope is that the Senate will pass H.R. 6331 so that we can keep our vital health care system in place for our most vulnerable citizens.