Dear Colleague,

Over the last several months, a good deal of energy in Washington has been spent debating proposals to transform the U.S. health care system so that actual legislation can considered by Congress over the summer. I am writing to you today to alert you to the impact of these proposals on our specialty and inform you of the College’s Health Care Reform Agenda. Pathology is at a critical juncture, and no matter where you are in your career, now is the time to get involved.

The timeline for enacting health care reform legislation is unusually tight, just a few months. Congressional leaders and the President hope to have new legislation signed into law by October 2009. Given the timeframe, we must act quickly to address the issues that potentially could damage our practices now and in the future.

Of course, we all support the primary objectives of these proposals, which are to expand health care coverage to uninsured individuals, to improve the quality of care by promoting greater coordination of care among health care professionals, and to reduce health care costs overall. But the devil is the details and we need to understand those details and make sure our voice is heard on issues that potentially impact our specialty and the patients we serve.

The reform proposals circulating on Capitol Hill are detailed and cast a wide net. Some of the proposals, if not modified, could negatively impact pathology practices today. Other proposals, if adopted, will result in long-term systemic changes that will rely more heavily on a coordinated care model and a team based approach to delivery of care. This is more than an ambitious legislative agenda. Its impact will be immediate, its effect will last for years; and it has a good chance of becoming law.

The College is working on your behalf to mitigate against any potential cuts as well as advocating to ensure that pathologists are positioned to add value in a reformed health care system. To meet these challenges, the CAP Board of Governors has approved the College’s own
Health Care Reform Agenda to address the issues that will most directly impact our practices today and in the future.

In the near term, correcting (or replacing) the flawed SGR formula for physician payment must be a priority as pathologists and all physicians face a 21.5% cut in Medicare payments in 2010. Moreover, payments to pathologists and other specialists should not be cut in order to shift funds to pay the proposed bonus incentives to primary care physicians and general surgeons. The College does not oppose efforts to ensure that primary care physicians are properly compensated, but if the cornerstone of reform is more reliant on team based coordinated care, increased payments for one member of the health care team should not be paid by decreasing funding for other members of the health care team.

In the area of Pay for Performance, the College has been leading the response of the specialty, and has secured approval of two pathology measures. However, the government’s measures development process has been fraught with procedural and logistical hurdles that have impeded the timely approval of additional pathology measures. The College believes any potential penalties for limited participation are as yet unfounded, given the uncertainty surrounding the measures development process.

Equally important, the College is committed to ensuring the future role of our specialty and will advocate for the government to modify the current Medicare consultation policy to enable and incentivize pathologists to initiate medical consultations with primary care and other physicians on appropriate test selection and recommendations on optimal therapy options. As health care coverage is expanded, there will be increased demand for laboratory testing at a time when diagnostic testing is becoming increasingly complex and expensive. As pathologists, we can play a vital role in ensuring that patients get the right test at the right time, ensuring optimal patient care while reducing inappropriate testing and saving money for the health care system. To enable the role we envision, pathologists will also need greater access to the electronic health record and the patient information contained within. Towards that end, the College will be advocating for federal incentive funds for pathologists to upgrade their laboratory information systems to enable greater access to electronic health records patient records.

Our policy agenda is challenging and ambitious, as I believe it must be. The legislation that will be moving through Congress will impact all of us. I urge all of you to join us in this effort. Read our Health Care Reform Agenda Overview. Commit to contacting your Member of Congress and join our national grassroots campaign for pathology by contacting Justin Herman at jherman@cap.org in our Advocacy Office. And of course, if you have comments or concerns, we want to hear from you. Please write to me personally at President@cap.org.

Sincerely,

Jared N. Schwartz, MD, PhD, FCAP
President