

A Monthly Newsletter from ADEA Executive Director Richard W. Valachovic, D.M.D., M.P.H.

In this month's letter, Dr. Rick Valachovic, Executive Director of the American Dental Education Association, weighs in on the emerging national debate on health care reform and what it means for dental education.



Policy and Politics: Necessary Bedfellows

With presidential candidate debates almost every week and regular media reports about the upcoming primaries and caucuses, it's hard to forget that a presidential election year is already upon us. Once again the spotlight is on health care and, this time around, there seems to be a growing consensus that something must be done to transform the U.S. health care system. Public opinion polls confirm that access to affordable health care is the public's number one domestic concern.

It won't surprise you to hear that no one is satisfied with the current system. Consumers resent growing premiums. Providers lament inadequate reimbursement. And employers find their long-term economic prognoses increasingly bleak as health care costs consume a growing portion of their budgets.

What is ADEA's role in all this? The issue of dental care was marginalized in the health care debate of the 1990s. Yet, well over 100 million Americans, including almost 23 million children, have no dental insurance. The recent death of Deamonte Driver, a 12-year-old Maryland boy who died because of a brain infection of odontogenic origin, underscores the critical need to ensure that all Americans have access to oral health services.

I know I am preaching to the choir, but this bears repeating because there's no guarantee that oral health will receive adequate attention in the coming debate on health care reform. Practically speaking, there are no oral health benefits covered by Medicare, and only one mandated benefit (for children) in Medicaid. The oral health community must be at the tables where health care reform is debated to ensure that oral health services are included in a basic benefits package. ADEA has been and will continue to be a participant in those debates.

The recent political debate around the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) foreshadows the significant ideological struggles that will shape efforts to reform our health care system. Concerns that enlarging this popular program might lead to greater government involvement in the lives of U.S. citizens ultimately defeated this year's proposals to expand SCHIP benefits. Nevertheless, ADEA and the entire dental community can be proud of their efforts to craft SCHIP language and deliver the message to Congress that dental coverage is essential to children's health. Prior to the presidential veto, both the House and the Senate approved the addition of a guaranteed dental benefit in the bill to reauthorize SCHIP. ADEA and its coalition partners will work to include this same guarantee when Congress considers the program again in 2008.

Which brings me around to the intimate connection between policy and politics. As this past year's debate over SCHIP illustrates all too clearly, even policies that are widely embraced cannot be implemented without first preparing the political ground. How do we do that? Where should we focus our energies? What strategies should we employ? How can we translate the public's desire for health care reform into positive change under the next administration?

To help us answer these questions, we have invited two outstanding speakers to the 2008 ADEA Annual Session. These individuals have long track records in health policy and national politics and are well positioned to help us understand the political forces that will be in play over the next four years.

Atul Gawande, M.D., M.A., M.P.H., is a writer and surgeon associated with Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, the Dana Farber Cancer Institute, and Harvard University's schools of medicine and public health. He served as a senior health

The favorable alignment of current political realities with ADEA's commitment to support policies that promote and enhance access to care creates an unprecedented opportunity for us.

policy advisor in the Clinton White House in the early 1990s when, as he puts it, "our plan for universal coverage failed." But Gawande is encouraged by the proposals coming forward from the current crop of presidential candidates. Looking across the nation, he sees remarkable similarity in the positions of leaders throughout the political and economic spheres. What shape might a reformed health care system take? We'll see what he has to say when we meet in Dallas this spring.

James Carville needs little introduction. After scoring a series of victories for senatorial and gubernatorial candidates in the 1980s and 1990s, he became a household name in 1992 when he guided Bill Clinton to the presidency. His 2006 book with Paul Begala, *Take It Back: Our Party, Our Country, Our Future*, casts the spotlight on issues that can garner widespread popular support, and they place health care near the top of that list.

This favorable alignment of current political realities with ADEA's commitment to support policies that promote and enhance access to care creates an unprecedented opportunity for us. We can and must seize this moment. We're reaching out to our members through field advocacy workshops, our leadership development programs, and publications such as this to encourage everyone to become more active and involved in grassroots advocacy on behalf of health care reform.

We're also working in collaboration with other groups that share our goals. One of these is the National Coalition on Health Care. This coalition of major corporations, unions, health care providers, insurers, and religious, patient, and consumer groups is calling for a reformed health care system that includes:

- *Health insurance for all*
- *Improved quality of care and safety*
- *Cost containment*
- *Equitable financing*
- *Simplified administration*

In addition to endorsing these broad goals, the coalition has stated its strong support for a core benefit package that includes oral health care for all Americans.

As you can see, many avenues are open to us as we go about the business of improving access to oral health care. As always, a presidential election year brings renewed excitement and a nationwide desire for debate. Let's use this political opportunity to increase our engagement in the policy arena and to acquaint our colleagues and the public at large with our commitment to improving the health care of all Americans.



Richard W. Valachovic, D.M.D., M.P.H.
Executive Director
valachovicr@adea.org

American Dental Education Association

1400 K Street, NW, Suite 1100, Washington, DC 20005

For member service questions, call toll free 888-ADEA OPEN (888-233-2673)

Phone: 202-289-7201 Fax: 202-289-7204