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Section on Emergency Medicine Advocacy Scholarship
2009 AAP Legislative Conference report

Children cannot vote, and they don't contact their legislators, but decisions made by state and federal governments can have profound effects on their well-being. The AAP Legislative Conference is an opportunity for us as pediatricians to develop the skills we need to remind our government representatives that they need to consider children in everything that they do.

This is an exciting year to have attended the conference in Washington, D.C. With a new administration in the White House and a lot of positive momentum in Congress, there was a strong sense that this may be the year that we succeed in obtaining significant and positive healthcare reform. The speakers at the conference provided a helpful overview of the current healthcare policy environment in Washington, and background information about critical issues such as access and quality. The policy focus of this year's conference was on ensuring that the needs of children are appropriately addressed in all healthcare reform legislation, through universal access of all children to health coverage, pediatric-specific standards, and adequate support and payment for care delivery under the medical home model. Conference attendees were generally very excited about the recent passage of the Children's Health Insurance Plan Reauthorization Act (CHIPRA), but we were also repeatedly reminded that CHIP is not comprehensive reform. Even if every child who is eligible for CHIP enrolls, there will still be 5 million uninsured children in the United States. Although universal coverage for all adults may be difficult to attain, providing access to care for 5 million more children should be possible this year if we can muster the political will.

The presentations and workshops at the conference were designed to help us understand the AAP's policy priorities and to build our skills as advocates for children. We were able to put these skills to use during the conference in meetings with legislative staff; in addition, the hope is that the skills we developed will provide a basis for successful advocacy in our future contacts with the public, with government, and with the media. A workshop on interactions with media provided a number of useful tips on projecting a confident and effective persona during interviews. Another workshop helped us develop competence in crafting a short and targeted written message to be left with legislators after a meeting. Toward the end of the conference, there was a simulation exercise that introduced us to the complexity of the task faced by legislators as they balance their goals and ideals with the realities of limited resources and the need to be re-elected.

I found the opportunity to meet pediatricians from all over the country and all different specialties and practice settings as interesting as the specific talks and workshops. To see so many pediatricians coming together to advocate for children's health was a wonderful affirmation of our professional commitment to be dedicated to the health of all children. As a pediatric emergency medicine physician, I am accustomed to thinking about the problems of uninsured and underinsured children when it comes to obtaining medications and arranging follow up care, but it was enlightening to hear private practice pediatricians discuss their own difficulties with inadequate Medicaid

reimbursement for complex patients in need of a medical home and the challenge of finding specialists who will accept Medicaid patients. This underscores the AAP's point that simply providing coverage for children through a program like CHIP is not adequate to ensure access; the specific terms of the coverage need to be appropriate to allow both specialists and generalists the ability to provide the care that is needed while still keeping their businesses afloat.

The culmination of the conference was Tuesday morning, when the group traveled together to Capitol Hill to meet with our legislators or their aides. I was particularly interested in the talk that started our day on the Hill, because it was given by my own senator, Amy Klobuchar from Minnesota. Senator Klobuchar expressed considerable enthusiasm for our policy mission; she also described her own focus on enacting sensible national school lunch standards in order to improve childhood nutrition. After that welcome, we dispersed to our own individual meetings. I met with legislative staff members for Senator Klobuchar and Representative Keith Ellison (my second senator's election is still being disputed, so I only had one senator to approach). Both legislators have been reliable supporters of children's health, but it was still helpful to have the opportunity to discuss the specifics of the AAP's policy recommendations. After the meetings, we all met back at the hotel to share our experiences over lunch. It was particularly interesting to hear from people who had met with legislators who were opposed to the kind of health reform that we were there to discuss. Despite differences over policy, almost all the participants described respectful and thought provoking discussions.

Overall, I found the 2009 AAP Legislative Conference to be a terrific introduction to the principles and techniques of pediatric advocacy. It was an opportunity for pediatricians from all different backgrounds to build our skills and our enthusiasm for this important activity. I highly recommend the conference to anyone with an interest in government advocacy, and I thank the Section on Emergency Medicine for the scholarship support that enabled me to attend.