

E-mail us

Send to Journal op-ed page at  
opinion@abqjournal.com

# OP-ED

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2006

## N.M. Primary Care Docs a Vanishing Breed

BY DR. ROBERT G.  
STRICKLAND

*American College of Physicians-  
N.M.*

Medicare patients in New Mexico are facing a looming crisis in access, quality and cost. It's a crisis that will soon accelerate if a pending Medicare payment cut is allowed to go into effect.

Like many states, New Mexico is facing a future where there will not be enough primary care doctors to take care of an aging population with more chronic diseases.

In 1985, the state had 150,354 Medicare beneficiaries. Today there are 260,947, and the state's population over age 65 is projected to grow by 74 percent between 2000 and 2020. The number of elderly patients with multiple and complex chronic diseases is also exploding. The chronic diseases — like hypertension and diabetes — are among the most expen-

sive to treat. One recent study concluded that all of Medicare's cost increases over the past several years are due to the increase in patients with multiple chronic diseases. Within 10 years, 150 million Americans will have one or more chronic diseases and the population age 85 and over will increase 50 percent from 2000 to 2010.

At the same time, there has been a precipitous decline in the number of physicians who are going into the primary care specialties — internal medicine and family physicians — that Medicare patients most depend on to take care of their chronic illnesses. And many who are in practice are retiring early, or are limiting how many patients they will see.

New Mexico had only 62 active primary care physicians per 100,000 population in 2000, 11 percent lower than the national average of 69, according to the Bureau of Health Pro-

fessions. And in 2004, about 40 percent of the 5,169 physicians in New Mexico were over the age of 55 and approaching retirement, the American Medical Association reports.

Many of these physicians already are leaving medicine. According to a study published in the January 3, 2006 issue of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, after a little over 10 years in practice, 21 percent of internal medicine physicians were no longer working in primary care, compared to 5 percent of specialists who have left their fields.

Unless Congress acts within the next few weeks, physicians will experience a 5.1 percent cut in Medicare reimbursements. This cut will compound New Mexico's looming access and quality crisis by making it even more difficult for physicians to continue to see Medicare patients.

It will likely result in more New Mexico physicians choosing early retirement, and dis-

courage young physicians from going into the specialties, like family and internal medicine, that take care of most Medicare patients. It will force many New Mexico physicians to limit the number of Medicare patients they can see, leading to even greater difficulties in getting timely appointments.

New Mexico already ranks below the national average in surveys of Medicare patients' ease of getting appointments with doctors, according to the federal Agency for Health Care Quality and Research. Last year, a little more than half of the state's Medicare patients reported that they can always get an appointment for routine care as soon as they want. Only nine states fared worse than New Mexico.

Health care costs will also increase. Research also shows that patients with chronic diseases who have an ongoing relationship with a primary

care doctor are less likely to have complications that lead to hospitalizations and major surgery. Congestive heart failure and diabetes are just two conditions where this applies, according to a summer of 2006 Medicare Payment Advisory Commission report.

It is imperative that Congress act to preserve Medicare patients' access to primary care.

As a first step, it should replace the 5.1 percent cut with an increase based on physicians' costs of delivering care. It should then work on a more fundamental redesign of Medicare payment policies to support the value of primary care medicine. Otherwise, there simply will not be enough primary care physicians in New Mexico to take care of our aging population.

Robert G. Strickland is an Albuquerque physician and governor of the New Mexico Chapter of the American College of Physicians.



© RICHARD MI  
ANGELES T