

ACCC/ONS Third Annual Policy Institute

Taking Our Message to Capitol Hill

Forty oncology nurses, cancer program administrators, practice administrators, medical oncologists, and patient advocates made their voices heard on Capitol Hill. They raised awareness and helped educate legislators and their staffs about pressing issues in cancer care during congressional visits at the Third Annual Policy Institute hosted by ACCC and the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS). The meeting was held March 6-8, 2002, in Washington, D.C.

"You have a very important voice and represent a great number of constituents in your respective congressional districts," said Rep. Connie Morella (R-Md.), a 16-year-member of Congress. "Share your stories with lawmakers and you will be heard."

A similar message came from a past federal regulator, Kathleen A. Buto, M.P.A., who had been with the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA, now called the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, or CMS) for 18 years and led regulatory efforts in ambulatory payment classifications (APCs) and average wholesale price (AWP) of drugs, as well as DRGs, or diagnosis-related groups.

"You can play a critical role in the legislative and regulatory process," Buto said to attendees. "The agency is willing to listen and meet with any groups that deal directly with Medicare patients. CMS wants to focus on what's best for the Medicare beneficiary so that patient access is not impeded."

Critical Issues in Ensuring Access

ACCC and ONS advocates urged lawmakers and their staffs to take action on a number of pressing issues related to cancer care delivery. Perhaps most important, lawmakers were asked to help minimize the



Congresswoman Connie Morella (R-Md.) highlighted key health care issues in the 107th Congress.

impact of the hospital outpatient payment regulation that went into effect Aug. 1, 2000. The payment plan should more accurately reflect the cost of the therapy and be clinically neutral so there is no incentive to use particular drugs. In addition, advocates told their lawmakers, the payment system should not create administrative burdens on outpatient cancer centers by making it difficult to bill for covered therapies. ACCC and ONS are asking Congress to continue to take an active role in monitoring the payment rates to ensure Medicare beneficiary access to appropriate cancer therapies.

Lawmakers were also advised that changes to the AWP methodology for drug reimbursement in the physician office and hospital outpatient settings should be made thoughtfully and should recognize that payment methodologies and reimbursement levels in these two settings are different and will require different approaches. Congress is seeking to replace AWP as a payment method

for drugs in the physician office and hospital outpatient settings.

Although drug payments are higher than costs in physician offices, they currently offset inadequate reimbursement for chemotherapy administration. ACCC and ONS are urging Congress to ensure that any cuts in this setting are compensated for in the administration payment. In addition, ACCC and ONS are asking Congress to recognize that studies to date on drug overpayments have not looked at the hospital outpatient setting. In fact, an Abt Associates study completed last year indicates underpayment for drugs and their administration in the outpatient setting.

Advocates pointed out to their lawmakers that in recent months substantial attention has been paid to the potential impact of the nursing shortage on patient care. A coalition of nursing organizations is conducting an in-depth study of potential solutions that could ensure adequate numbers of qualified nurses.

A Congresswoman Speaks Out
Rep. Morella, speaking before Policy Institute attendees, noted that time is running out for the 107th Congress to act on a host of issues.

Morella expressed concern about the nursing shortage, pointing out that by the year 2010, 40 percent of the nursing workforce will be over the age of 50. She indicated that the number of graduates from nursing programs decreased by 13.6 percent between 1995 and 1999. To help provide a solution to this serious workforce shortage, Morella has introduced legislation, H.R. 3487, that would ensure enough trained and qualified nurses in the future by providing nursing recruitment grants, career ladder grants, faculty development grants, establishing a Nurse Service Corps, and providing reimbursement for non-hospital

providers that train nurses.

Morella also spoke about H.R. 3391, the Medicare Regulation and Contracting Reform Act, which the House passed. The bill, which is awaiting Senate action, provides important regulatory relief to health care providers, modernizes the Medicare contracting process, and protects taxpayers from potential fraud and abuse.

How to Communicate with Congress

The Policy Institute offered attendees presentations by leading experts on the dynamics of the 107th Congress, the regulatory process and the health industry, and communicating effectively with congressional staff.

Since the horrific event of September 11 and the anthrax scare, congressional offices are encouraging constituents to communicate via e-mail rather than by letter writing or sending faxes. Members of Congress received twice as many e-mails in 2001 than in 2000.

Most offices answer messages only from constituents, said speaker Robert McLean, M.A., president of REM Legislative Services Inc., in Arlington, Va. He indicated that



Sharing viewpoints at the ACCC/ONS Policy Institute: (left) Diane M. Otte, R.N., M.S., OCN[®], director, radiation therapy, Fairview Health Services, Eagan, Minn.; Molly Loney, M.S.N., R.N., AOCN[®], oncology nurse, Cleveland Clinic Foundation; and Melissa Craft, R.N., M.S., clinical nurse specialist, OU Physicians, Oklahoma City, Okla.

staffers in congressional offices are in their early twenties and often inexperienced in health issues.

“Make a good impression during your congressional visit so staff will remember you,” said McLean. “You are the experts in cancer care, so educate and enlighten.”

McLean noted the need to be persistent and to invite lawmakers to tour institutions so they can see how cancer programs really work. “A site visit is the most effective tool to educate members of Congress about issues that are important to you,” said McLean.

ONS President Paula T. Rieger, R.N., M.S.N., C.S., AOCN[®],

FAAN, pointed out that nurses can have a great deal of influence in the legislative process by testifying at hearings and presenting written testimony. Building coalitions is also an effective tool for influencing lawmakers and regulators.

Overall, Policy Institute attendees showed a great deal of interest and enthusiasm about participating in the legislative process on Capitol Hill. “I’ll tell Congress our problems—such as adequate reimbursement for oncology nursing care and access to cancer care for patients—and I’ll keep telling them what we do for patients until they hear me,” promised one attendee. ☺

Congratulations!

On Friday March 22, 2002, ACCC’s Board of Trustees for 2002–2003 was formally installed. We welcome them all.

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