



A House Divided against Itself

Lee E. Mortenson (Senior Editor)

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FROM THE EDITOR

A House Divided Against Itself



Many of you may have been fortunate enough to miss the FAX battle. This is a paper war that is going on between some state societies, ASCO, and ACCC. With the advent of FAX machines, we can now crank out epistles with ease and FAX them directly to our opponent's attention, while we FAX a copy to the world.

Of course, I have a prejudiced view of these proceedings. Like the recent Dr. Seuss book, *The Butter Battle*, I butter my bread right side up, not upside down. In other words, in my opinion, most of the fighting is about *who* is right, not *what* is right! As in Dr. Seuss' book, the battle has been escalating the past couple of months. FAX machines have been whirring at faster and faster rates. Conference calls have been getting bigger and bigger. Are you on the right FAX list? Whose conference calls have you been on? This is, of course, silly.

The issues mentioned during all of this are ephemeral. Is oncology well represented with HCFA? Who should represent oncology? Is oncology getting a fair shake at HCFA? Are they out gunning for us? Are our own representatives trading us in for government brownie points? Is the leadership tightly controlled by one man, by a small in-crowd, by (god forbid) lawyers?

The answer, my friend, depends. Rumors, accusations and angry finger pointing are getting to be daily occurrences. Where you sit is where you stand: are you doing better or worse?

It is clear that with the coming of RBRVS, the medical profession is beginning to see another evolutionary change in

health care reimbursement. Some oncologists are doing better than previously and some are not. Some of the puzzle remains to be uncovered when HCFA releases Dr. Hsiao's data on the oncology vignettes. A number of oncologists are unhappy and perceive that they have been poorly represented. A number do not.

So now we have different delegations of oncologists visiting HCFA, telling government bureaucrats different stories, presenting different data, and getting different responses. Visiting HCFA is like going to the ancient Delphi Oracle. Did the Oracle predict your future? Did the Oracle pick your brain? Did you learn anything real? Communications from the HCFA Oracle often are vague and leave the inexperienced communicant with the impression that they've won.

When you sit back for a minute and look at all those FAX machines whirring, all those long-distance operators placing calls, you have to marvel at it all. It's a great stimulus to the economy, but it isn't doing much for the profession.

I recently spoke with one of the leaders of a new "splinter" group. I asked what was different about his comments to HCFA from everyone else's. "Detail," he raged. "We had more detail!" Other than that, were there any differences," I asked. "No, but those other guys stole our ideas." Phooey.

On Easter, every time I turned on the tube, there was Jesus, standing on the Mount, saying, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Whether it is Jesus or Dr. Seuss, I think the message is clear for medical oncology. These are all bread and butter issues (regardless of which side you butter) and it would be incredibly dense of us to work against each other. In the long run, the only ones who will appreciate that strategy are the guys who are already expert at an old Roman strategy: Divide and Conquer.

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