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To cite this article: Christian G. Downs (2000) Riders on the Storm, *Oncology Issues*, 15:6, 6-6, DOI: [10.1080/10463356.2000.11905165](https://doi.org/10.1080/10463356.2000.11905165)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10463356.2000.11905165>



Published online: 17 Oct 2017.



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by Christian G. Downs

Over the past year, cancer care providers and advocates have been working on a variety of important issues, including access to cancer and supportive care drugs, coverage of clinical trials, and implementation of the hospital outpatient payment system.

While we have been working so strenuously on the ground, an ominous storm cloud is gathering overhead. A recently released report indicates that employers' health care costs are expected to increase at double-digit rates for the rest of this year and early next year. The data were presented in the *Health Care Trend Survey*, a national report published by Buck Consultants, a human resources consulting firm. The firm surveyed more than 80 insurers, HMOs, and billing administrators.

The insurers projected the following rate increases: indemnity plans, 13.7 percent; preferred provider organizations, 11.2 percent; point of service, 9.9 percent; HMOs, 8.6 percent; and prescription drugs, a whopping 19 percent.

Why should providers and patient advocates be concerned?

A quick history lesson. The last time rates increased at these levels was in the early 1990s. At that time many politicians campaigned on a platform of health reform. In fact, President Clinton and the first lady spent much of the first two years of their administration working on a health reform plan. Looking back on the reform movement, it is important to point out that the primary advocates of reform were employers—not patients or providers—who could no longer afford to provide their employees with health insurance.

As we start to see insurance rates

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increase again, we need to be prepared for another round of potential reform measures. Many issues that are critical to the cancer community—access to new and improved treatments, adequate payment for services, and access to clinical trials—will no doubt once again come under review. Although each of us may have our own ideas about what “reform” means, we can all agree that any cost savings that falls on the backs of cancer patients and providers will neither be supported nor tolerated.

To that end, all of us on the cancer care team must become better and stronger advocates for our positions and our patients.

ACCC's recent Oncology Presidents' Institute (see related article on page 34) focused on how to raise awareness among congressional staff and members of Congress about the complex issues affecting cancer care. The physicians, nurses, and patient advocates in attendance were urged to become proactive.

“Letter writing is the most effective way to get a point across to a member of Congress. It is also the most effective way to ask a member of Congress to introduce, cosponsor, support, or oppose specific legislation,” said Capitol Hill lobbyist Robert McLean.

McLean told meeting attendees to keep their letters simple. State in the first paragraph the reason for the letter. Write on your organization's letterhead. Ask legislators to state their positions on the issue by written reply. Finally, avoid standard phrases that give the appearance of form letters. They have less impact than a more personal one.

Not all congressional offices accept e-mail. A letter is still preferred.

Another effective way of communicating with legislators is through telephone conversations. Every representative and senator

has an office in Washington, and at least one in the home district or state. Phone calls to a member's office are effective even when it is not possible to speak to the member directly.

A face-to-face meeting is the best way to communicate your positions on legislative issues. Legislators appreciate constituents giving their opinions. Legislators meet with constituents both in Washington and when they are back in their home district or state.

Because of the hectic schedule kept by every member of Congress, constituents often meet with legislative aides. Many are young (under age 25), and because of their inexperience, may have only a passing familiarity with issues relating to oncology. Therefore, it is critical to provide these individuals with background information pertaining to a bill, as well as information about your position on the bill.

How can you help your representative or senator understand—and remember—such complex issues as the potentially damaging effects that cutting drug margins will have on cancer care delivery? A visit to your office practice or hospital! You get more time with the member or staffer, without the competition of phone calls, votes, and hearings.

The best time to invite a member of Congress to tour your cancer program or hospital is when you are in the member's office during a personal visit. Plan carefully for the visit. Prepare briefing materials. Stage a dress rehearsal. A site visit is an excellent opportunity to impress members and staffers, so be prepared.

Finally, don't be afraid to ask a member of Congress for help in battling an issue close to your heart. As McLean said, “If you don't ask, you don't get.” ■