

Today's Health for the Empowered Woman

AN AMATEUR LOBBYIST IN WASHINGTON

Every year the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists representing 40,000 ob-gyns across the country, selects two doctors to spend two weeks in Washington learning the ins and outs of the legislative process and to actively lobby for women's health. This year I was one of the fortunate two who were selected. As I have always been interested in politics and especially that concerning the health care of women and children I found this fellowship to be an ideal way to help my patients, voice the concerns of the doctor in practice, and to try and make a dent in the federal miasma of health care. Two weeks away from my practice was a huge sacrifice but certainly worth it with so much at stake. The ACOG office of government affairs put together my agenda to get me involved in the process immediately. At my very first legislative breakfast I was told by the waiter, no less: "remember you are in the most powerful city on earth." Indeed, the very scope of the federal government is exemplified by the size of the buildings and the huge staff that is necessary to make this whole process run. Only 435 congressman and 100 senators are elected and entrusted by three hundred million Americans to legislative everything from health laws and defense to the price of postage stamps. What became evident immediately is that much health care legislation is on hold while awaiting the decision of the Supreme Court and what it holds for "Obamacare". My organization and my own personal viewpoint is that certain items in Obamacare are beneficial to women such as universal maternity coverage, preventative health services, and breast feeding rights. What is not good is the individual mandate and the Independent Payment Advisory Board –fifteen unelected officials with no accountability that will decide what treatments will be allowed under Medicare. We also need meaningful medical liability reform that has been demonstrated to save 42 billion dollars by the congressional budget office and a fix of the Sustained Growth Rate formula that if not enacted soon will result in cuts to doctors' fees for Medicare that are so draconian that most doctors will not be able to afford to see Medicare patients. So how did we do? I met with Congressmen Roakem and Pitts who were very supportive; Congresswoman Ellmers, a nurse who has a husband who is a surgeon and by extension understands the problems; Congressman Heck, a physician from Nevada who was very supportive. But since we live in a democracy with many people with very many different ideas formulated by their life experiences, there were those legislators who did not agree such as Congressman Neal of Massachusetts who did not understand reimbursement issues or the impending crisis facing Medicare. At a breakfast with Senators Manchin, Murray and Brown I learned that there are many democrats who are supportive of reducing health care costs through such means as electric medical records that will improve safety for patients through legible record keeping, accurate prescribing and elimination of duplicate procedures. This was reflected at a meeting I attended at the National Press Club concerning electric medical records but they did not understand that without adequate reimbursement physicians cannot even begin to afford the high cost of these systems especially given such uncertainty with the Supreme Court still out and a lame duck congress in sight. I was fortunate to be invited to briefings concerning domestic violence and the Judiciary Committee hearings on both medical malpractice and the proposed tax on medical devices. As I am writing this at my cubby hole here in Washington I just learned that female republican

congresswomen are starting a female caucus to address this very issue of violence against women which is more pervasive than I had originally thought. For the readers who are of a more conservative bent be assured that Senator Orrin Hatch from Utah was like a refreshing breeze—he supports all our concerns about health care but is a great conciliator and realizes that partisan politics is not how we are going to move health care forward in a way that is affordable and safe. I won't bore you with minutiae of legislative details but it was interesting to note that all these legislators are constantly surrounded by aides, lobbyists, lap top toting news junkies, hoards of smart phone bearing political science students and unidentified government employees feeding them policy statements, schedules, and up to the minute changes in legislation. "Washington is the only city where sound travels faster than light" and no one wants to miss a thing. On my first day I took a tour of the Capitol and a brief movie was shown that highlighted our nation's democratic process and gave a history of the monumental laws that were passed in that building. The sense of history was overwhelming. "E Pluribus Unum"—"from many, one". What better term to exemplify what goes on here? So many different viewpoints and opinions from such an ethnically, religiously and demographically diverse nation mandate that issues are to be debated and debated so that the right solution can be found. I hope that my voice from one practicing ob-gyn from a small town in Upstate New York will be heeded by some legislator when he casts his vote--if that is not empowerment, nothing is. Next month will share with you the results of my upcoming meetings with our Congressman Bill Owens and with legal aides of Senators Schumer and Gillebrand.