

April 2009 -WOMEN'S HEALTH IS TOO IMPORTANT TO IGNORE

On March 3, 2009 eleven hundred physicians gathered on the Capital steps in Albany in an attempt to convince legislators to enact legislation that would preserve and conserve health care to all New Yorkers. I am obstetrician/gynecologist and Chair of the Legislative Committee for the New York State Chapter of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists—also known as ACOG. We represent more than four thousand members who provide health care to New York's women. Similarly on December 19, 2008 I spoke at a legislative forum at SUNY Oswego before Senators Aubertine and Valesky on the same issues.

I have been selected as the spokesman for ACOG because I have delivered well over 6500 babies in 30 years of practice. As a practicing ob-gyn I feel that I am uniquely qualified to speak on the subject of women's health care. I was born and educated In New York State, received an Oswego County scholarship for medical school and I have helped my community by providing care to the very large underserved population of Oswego County since 1980.

One of the biggest issues that New Yorkers face is universal maternity care—an area where the delivery of services is sorely lacking. ACOG has a program entitled: “Health Care for Women, Health Care for All”. It is widely recognized that women who have access to comprehensive maternity care have healthier babies, are less likely to deliver prematurely and are less likely to experience serious complications during pregnancy. That is why the need for universal maternity care is so great in New York State. Over the past several years, the percentage of pregnant women in New York State receiving adequate prenatal care has remained persistently low. In a 2005 state-by-state analysis, only 63.8 percent of pregnant women in New York received adequate prenatal care, ranking New York State 48 among the 50 states! New York State is also far behind in the Health People 2010 goal which strives for 90 percent of live births to be delivered to women who received early and adequate prenatal care. A change in fragmented prenatal care delivery system is needed. Any consideration of programmatic health care enhancements for children and families must start with the provision of a comprehensive maternity benefit package. It is ACOG's hope that our universal maternity care proposal is ultimately incorporated into the larger discussion of a universal health care system in New York. We envision a program that will offer women more comprehensive and clinically appropriate health care services, strengthen public education and the utilization of prenatal care and raise provider reimbursements.

Access to care is being severely challenged in New York State. A combination of low reimbursements to providers and escalating costs of practicing (salaries, utilities, equipment and malpractice insurance) are creating a situation where physicians are retiring early, relocating to other states, restricting their practices to low risk procedures, and finding trouble recruiting new physicians to come to their area. My very own practice has had and still has trouble recruiting to our county and the reasons cited are always the same: “the reimbursement is low, the malpractice rates are high”. The legislature has ignored ACOG's statistics and arguments and now is considering new laws that would actually raise our rates by 20%--if enacted would effectively drive many obstetricians out of practice. If our practice were driven out women would have to travel 40 miles to Syracuse in a potential blizzard to deliver. Despite years of lobbying in Albany and in Washington, no changes or suggestions have been enacted. Call your legislator and ask: “what have YOU done for women's health care?” ACOG has proposed a system (similar to worker's compensation) that quickly, equitably and fairly rewards neurologically impaired infants the services they need. Such a system would provide medical care, case management and process for the review of the negligence or the standard of care. Our proposed system will help families to navigate a confusing system of medical benefits and services already available and would provide the child with lifelong care. This program would increase patient safety through comprehensive reviews and would reduce legal system costs throughout New York.

According to the latest report issued by the U.S. Senate Finance Committee on health care reform, medical liability reform is not just a state issue but a national one as well. It is noted that “alternatives to civil litigation need to be utilized so that administrative costs associated with litigation can be reduced. Helping patients and providers to cooperate rather than participate in time consuming and expensive legal battles may help to shift America’s health care system away from the costly practice of defensive medicine and toward the best quality care and adherence to standards of care”.

Because WOMENS HEALTH IS TOO IMPORTANT TO IGNORE, I hope that the New York Legislature is able to arrive at some comprehensive reforms and cost saving measures in the area of health care.