

# MEDICINE & HEALTHCARE:



By Patricia A. Costante

## PHYSICIAN ADVOCACY: The Need for a Coordinated Response in NJ

Each day when I read the news, I see a constant flow of legislation, announcements and initiatives that will or could have a significant impact on physicians. Managing a career and a successful practice seems to only grow more challenging for physicians, who are extremely busy on a daily basis caring for their patients and managing their practices, all the while facing unprecedented administrative and regulatory challenges. Now, more than ever, I get the sense that there is a clear need for greater physician advocacy.

After what has seemed like an eternity of waiting, I am certain that we are all eagerly anticipating some clarification on the Affordable Care Act (ACA). After all, the ACA is arguably the most consequential domestic legislation since the creation of Medicare in 1965. As I write this, the Supreme Court justices are deciding whether the individual mandate is constitutional. And if not, what will become of the law's hundreds of other provisions? Are some or all of them "severable," meaning that Congress would have wanted them to stand even if the mandate falls? What will happen with the provisions that depended on the mandate, such as the provisions establishing tax credits to help small businesses and individuals buy health insurance and taxing large employers that do not provide full-time employees government-approved coverage? There are many parts of the act, including the expansion of Medicaid, that could be implemented and that have little to do with the mandate. But without the mandate, the ACA would cover fewer people and would be significantly less effective.

The Supreme Court is expected to announce its decision in late June, and if the individual mandate portion of the law is upheld, it will go into effect on January 1, 2014. This means that the states will have a lot of work to do to prepare, and physicians will need to respond accordingly. On May 10, 2012, Governor Chris Christie vetoed a bill that would have set up a health insur-

ance exchange in New Jersey, opting instead to wait for the Supreme Court's decision. If the ACA is upheld, all states will need to launch health insurance exchanges, or the federal government will create one for them. To date, fourteen states have set up exchanges.

But regardless of the outcome of the Supreme Court decision, we know that the healthcare landscape in New Jersey and across the nation will continue to evolve. The battle for adequate Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement continues to be ongoing. Meanwhile, three accountable-care organizations (ACOs) in New Jersey recently won approval to participate in the Centers for Medicaid Services' Shared Savings Program. Under this program, Medicare patients who volunteer to participate in one of the ACOs will see new levels of coordination between the physicians and health care organizations they use. It also means those organizations will be rewarded based on 33 criteria relating to quality of care and elimination of unnecessary or duplicate procedures and hospitalizations.

And recruiting our most talented students into medicine isn't getting any easier, either. Primary care, in particular, is in a very distressed state right now. There does not appear to be enough money to sustain primary care doctors in New Jersey, and students are not selecting primary care as a specialty because of the economics. While New Jersey has a documented shortage of physicians, particularly primary care physicians, there are no clear recruitment or retention programs currently in place. As one strategy to address this shortage, MDAdvantage and other healthcare partners across the state have supported the Edward J. III Excel-

lence in Medicine Scholarship Fund, which was created to invest in the future of medicine in New Jersey and improve access to healthcare for our residents.

With so much yet unknown about how physicians will need to respond to the anticipated changes in healthcare delivery, what I do know is that there is a clear need for the responses of physicians to be coordinated. This becomes even more important as we approach the November elections. Physicians need to be included in the conversations that health care policy advisors and legislators are currently engaged in, and their voices need to be heard.

Now is the time to take action. As an advocate for physicians everywhere, MDAdvantage has sent out questionnaires to physicians and groups statewide asking them to speak out on these important issues. Responses and excerpts will be published in the summer issue of MDAdvisor: A Journal for the New Jersey Medical Community.

It is essential that physicians develop and prioritize the messages they feel need to be conveyed to our elected officials, legislators and state regulators. One way to stay informed is to become involved with those groups and organizations that are able to represent your interests, whether it be local medical or specialty societies or business partners that are willing to hear your concerns and work with you to communicate your needs to the appropriate parties.

*Patricia Costante is the Chairman and CEO of MDAdvantage Insurance Company of New Jersey in Lawrenceville. For more information, visit [www.MDAdvantageonline.com](http://www.MDAdvantageonline.com).*



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[www.PhysiciansNews.com](http://www.PhysiciansNews.com)

**Brad Broker**  
Editor & Publisher

[brad@physiciansnews.com](mailto:brad@physiciansnews.com)

Mean Eyes Design  
Design & Layout

Kyle Odum/ikodum.com  
Web Developer

Ben Birenbaum  
Business Manager

#### CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Michelle Andrews  
Julie Appleby  
Walter Brasch  
Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine)  
Patricia A. Costante

Ron Howrigan  
Riyaj Kasekar, MD  
David B. Mandell, JD, MBA  
Alan Mandeloff  
Jason M. O'Dell, MS, CWM

VOL. 24, NO. 6 PHYSICIANS NEWS DIGEST (ISSN: 1079-6312) is published monthly by Physicians News Media, LLC. Postmaster: Send address changes to: 600 Louis Drive, Ste. 203, Warminster, PA 18974.

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