

## COMMENTARY

## ORGANIZED MEDICINE IN A DESTABILIZED ERA

**W**e have entered a destabilized era in health care. The oversupply of hospitals and physicians, combined with cost containment, has led to



*Richard S. Wilbur, MD*

managed care and for-profit systems. Two of the major challenges now in medicine are the liability crisis and competition—among hospitals, between physicians and nonphysicians, between general practitioners and specialists, and among general specialists, subspecialists, and subspecialists. As the oversupply of physicians increases, we

see more and more the need for a physician to have some special piece of paper, some certificate of qualification, in order to be allowed to perform a procedure—regardless, in some cases, of a satisfactory track record of competent performance. Somewhat related to this trend, the setting of standards for the medical profession is occurring outside the profession by insurance clerks, third-party payers, judges, and juries.

The medical profession also faces challenges from within by what we at the Council of Medical Specialty Societies (CMSS) call “YFMS,” or the young, female, minority, or salaried physicians who, in general, are disenchanted with organized medicine. In addition, organized medicine constantly faces challenges from changes in patient population, diseases, and the science and technology of medicine. Those who remember that physicians once specialized in syphilology or polio rehabilitation with the iron lung know that progress can wipe out an entire specialty—even one that is well run by competent physicians. The treatments for cancer and congenital diseases, for example, will most certainly change drastically within the next few years, which means that some of the older specialties will run into serious trouble, and there will be new specialties.

We tend to think that specialties are well defined because only four new certifying boards, including the American Board of Nuclear Medicine (ABNM), have been formed since 1949. The proliferation of subspecialties, however, belies that impression. We have entered an era in medicine that is full of dangers and challenges, but I suggest that it is also an era full of opportunities. As the past president of the American Hospital Association (AHA) once said: “Exploit the inevitable.” Do not merely accept the inevi-

table, but use the problems to enhance your situation.

The way to survive in this destabilized era of medicine is to conduct careful surveys to uncover trends that allow for strategic planning to prepare for the future. To predict what will happen in medicine, the CMSS surveys and resurveys (no survey remains valid forever) the profession.

From the CMSS surveys of YFMS, for example, we unexpectedly found that this group did not value its specialty society for continuing medical education, a peer-reviewed journal, or insurance programs. Instead, these physicians valued their specialty societies primarily for representing their interests in governmental and socioeconomic affairs more effectively than the large medical lobbies, such as the American Medical Association (AMA). The YFMS group perceives the cost of joining a specialty society high for the perceived value, and these physicians are more likely to spend free time with their families rather than at society activities. They join specialty societies because they want help with career opportunities, references for hospital privileges, review courses for board certification and recertification, the prestige of membership, and the chance to network with peers.

We at the CMSS believe that a medical specialty society needs to survey its members (as well as potential members) to find out whether the organization is serving real and present needs—not the needs of the past or the traditional needs for which the society was formed. We also believe that no one specialty society can predict what will happen to its specialty without looking at the broad picture of medicine. All specialties move forward simultaneously, and advances in one medical field can significantly impact another. The CMSS, which comprises 24 medical societies, including The Society of Nuclear Medicine (SNM), stands ready to facilitate your communication with other societies. The CMSS goals are to study the future, survey, resurvey, plan, and replan—working together so that small societies such as the SNM can work with larger ones to prepare for medical practice in the future.

In every new era of medicine, there have been losers. But there have also been winners. Today, those who successfully exploit the inevitable will be winners. In addition, the patients win because they receive more efficacious and cost-effective medical care.

*Richard S. Wilbur, MD, Executive Vice President  
Council of Medical Specialty Societies*