A Message from ACOG President Gerald F. Joseph, Jr., MD

ACOG Members in ACTION!

Last week, I had the tremendous honor to preside over ACOG’s 28th Annual Congressional Leadership Conference, The President’s Conference. It was great to be in the midst of close to 300 politically active and engaged ob-gyn leaders from across the Nation.

On Monday, March 1, the 21.5% SGR cut went into effect. On Tuesday, we marched to Capitol Hill, meeting with more than 300 Congressional offices, all on one united message: Repeal the SGR! And on Wednesday, the Senate passed legislation to push back the SGR cut by another month. Coincidence? Maybe, but I don’t think so.

Now, I know we didn’t do this alone. But we were a loud, clear, and important voice in a chorus of physician voices demanding Congressional action. And our collective voices are still resonating! Congress knows that the job won’t be done until the SGR is gone, forever – fixed permanently! Our PAC will hold Members of Congress accountable for their votes on SGR in the November elections.

At the CLC, we heard from Senator Debbie Stabenow and Representative Jan Schakowsky, from a leading pollster, from health policy professors and leading researchers in women’s health, and from Fellows developing promising alternative approaches to liability reform. We held our first Candidate Classroom, providing real-life applicable training to 13 ob-gyns currently running for a wide array of elective offices from around the country. It was truly invigorating!

We welcomed Ob-GynPAC into The American Congress of Ob-Gyns (ACOG,) on our PAC’s 10th anniversary, raising over $62,000 for our PAC. I have to say, the Fellow and Junior Fellow response to Ob-GynPAC was overwhelming, with our PAC party selling out in less than 2 hours! At this rate, and with your support, we will be a million dollar PAC in no time! We really have that potential.
ACOG’s 28th Annual Congressional Leadership Conference, the President’s Conference (CLC), held February 28 – March 2 in Washington, DC, could not have come at a more auspicious time, at the very moment that the 21.5% Medicare physician payment cut was due to go into effect.

More than 250 ob-gyns took part in two days of sessions and a Lobby Day, visiting more than 300 Congressional offices, with a united message to Repeal the SGR, and a second message calling for increased funding for research to reduce maternal mortality.

The evening of ACOG’s Lobby Day, Congress postponed the payment cut for another month, and many legislators were thanking ACOG members for pushing for insurance reforms and research priorities in women’s health.
Advocacy in a New Era: Lobbying + Politics = Results

ACOG leaders including President Gerald F. Joseph, Jr., MD, and Executive Vice President Ralph W. Hale, MD, welcomed CLC participants to Washington and briefed them on ACOG’s plans to expand ob-gyn advocacy and influence in Congress through Ob-GynPAC. Orthopaedic surgeon Stuart Weinstein, MD, Chair of the Orthopaedic PAC, a million dollar PAC, talked about the strength and value of OrthoPAC to their specialty.

CLC participants were incredibly enthusiastic, selling out tickets to the Ob-GynPAC fund-raiser at the International Spy Museum in only two hours. Honored at the meeting were these top Ob-GynPAC contributors in 2009 who attended the CLC:

Thaddeus Anderson, MD
James Breeden, MD
Robert Debbs, DO
Mark DeFrancesco, MD, MBA
Gregory DeMeo, DO
Jane Dimer, MD
Steven Fleischman, MD
Thomas Gellhaus, MD
Douglas Kirkpatrick, MD
Douglas Laube, MD
James Macer, MD
Robert Marotz, DO
MaryAnn Millar, MD
Laura Sirott, MD
J. Craig Strafford, MD, MPH
Albert Strunk, MD
Bruce Taylor, MD
Janice Tildon-Burton, MD
Michael Woods, MD

Our thanks to all ACOG members who support Ob-GynPAC.

Tips from Washington Insiders on Delivering a Message

Pollster Geoffrey Garin, the President of Hart Research Associates, suggested how Congressional Democrats should shape their message if they are to get past conflicting public opinion polls and pass reform. ACOG Fellow and U.S. Representative Phil Gingrey, MD (R-GA), told of how he decided to run for, and how he won, Congressional office. Christopher Davis of Congressional Research Service briefed CLC participants on how Congress works and how they fit in. For Hill visit techniques, Stephanie Vance of Advocacy Associates humorously demonstrated how to inspire a legislator to take action, not tune out.
Our First Ask: SGR Repeal

ACOG President Joseph welcomed Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) as keynote speaker for the President’s Lunch. The Senator was introduced by Michigan native Dr. Cynthia Brincat, Vice Chair of the Junior Fellow College Advisory Committee and a member of ACOG’s Government Affairs Committee. Senator Stabenow won multiple standing ovations for her legislation to repeal the SGR and to ensure women’s health in health reform.

With ACOG talking points and background material, available here, and advice from Judy Feder, PhD, a professor at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, and Chris Dawe, a staffer on the Senate Finance Committee, ACOG members were ready to brief legislators. Their key message: Medicare physician payment matters to all physicians and affects patient access to care; Congress has to repeal the SGR.

As ACOG Fellow Phillip Lahrmann, MD, wrote to Rep. Joe Courtney (D-CT), “Each year that Congress delays a permanent fix, the debt from the SGR grows and repeal becomes even more expensive. I urge you to repeal the SGR, eliminate the cliff, and replace it with a more rational payment system.”

Congress Responds: Pay Cut Postponed!

At 9 p.m. on ACOG’s Lobby Day, the U.S. Senate passed (78-19) the $10 billion Temporary Extension Act of 2010, which delays the Medicare payment cut to physicians until the end of March. The House of Representatives passed the legislation the previous week. This gives us another 3 weeks to push for a real solution.
Our Second Ask: Increase Funding for Women’s Health Research; Improve the Quality of Maternity Care in America

On Capitol Hill, from left: ACOG President Elect Richard N. Waldman, MD; President Gerald F. Joseph, Jr., MD; and ACOG Immediate Past President Douglas H. Kirkpatrick, MD.

ACOG members had another message to deliver on Lobby Day: Women's health research funding for Fiscal Year 2011 must improve maternity care outcomes.

For background, Alan Guttmacher, MD, Acting Director of the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and Jean R. Slutsky, PA, MSPH, the Director of the Center for Outcomes and Evidence Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, briefed ACOG on new opportunities for women’s health research and why Congressional support is critical. ACOG member Cathy Spong, MD, Director of the Pregnancy and Perinatology Branch at the NICHD, and Professor Richard Roden, PhD, of Johns Hopkins, reviewed what the federal government is currently supporting and why research is imperiled without additional funds.

Click here for ACOG’s fact sheet on increased funding for specific programs, and here for ACOG’s women’s health research priorities, including prematurity and obesity research at the NIH, CDC maternal-child health programs, infant mortality prevention programs, and funding for standardized electronic birth records.
ACOG President Joseph presented Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) with ACOG’s Public Service Award for her tireless leadership in introducing ACOG’s Health Care for Women, Health Care for All Resolution and ensuring women’s health in health reform. Participants thanked Rep. Schakowsky with a long standing ovation, before they headed to Capitol Hill.

Iowa Senator Charles Grassley (R), Ranking Member of the Senate Finance Committee, left, greets ACOG members on Lobby Day.
Coming Soon!

Watch for a Slide Show of CLC Photos in an upcoming edition of ACOG’s Legislative News.

State Alternatives to Caps
Obama Acknowledges Liability Pressures on Ob-Gyns

Also on the agenda of the CLC: medical liability reform. ACOG supports caps on non-economic damages, and strong tort reforms like those in Texas and California. One CLC session examined state legislative battles for alternatives to reduce the need for defensive medicine and reduce lawsuits. Tort reform advocate Philip Howard, JD, the Founder and Chair of Common Good, promoted health courts, and four ACOG Fellows shared their state experiences in pursuing neurologically impaired infant and other programs: Drs. Richard Berkowitz of New York, Paul Gluck of Florida, and Tony Ogburn of New Mexico, and ACOG Past President Douglas Kirkpatrick, MD, of Colorado.

At the health summit, President Obama responded to Republican pressure for tort reform, saying:

“And I would distinguish that between some of the frivolous lawsuits that are out there that really do create a defensive medical problem. And ob-gyns are the ones who get hit the hardest because people are so sympathetic when a child is born with severe disabilities. And it can just be crippling on ob-gyns.”

Physicians are pushing hard for Congress to include meaningful liability reform in health reform. Read detailed arguments here, in a letter to Obama from ACOG and over 75 other physician groups.

An End May Be in Sight: Easter Deadline for Health Care

House and Senate Democrats are ready to go it alone, pushing health reform through on reconciliation rules, a very tricky proposition. Democratic leaders announced the following timetable for legislative action:

March 19: The House votes on the Senate bill, H.R. 3590, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.

March 21: The House votes on reconciliation.

March 23: The Senate debate begins on reconciliation.

March 26: Senate votes begin.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) is threatening that Senators must stay both weeks of the Easter recess that starts March 29, to get the job done.