

The Unintentional Consequences of Health Care Reform Could Harm Pasco Regional Medical Center – and You

As Members of Congress prepare to tackle the vitally important issue of health care reform, they would do well to keep in mind the key element of the physicians' Hippocratic Oath: "Above all, do no harm."

We believe our national policymakers have good intentions in this debate, but we also know they're faced with an incredibly complicated task: making health care more affordable and reining in costs, extending coverage to 50 million uninsured Americans, and preparing for the demands that will be placed on the system by the retirement of 77 million Baby Boomers.

However, the decisions being made in Washington today could directly affect patient care here in Pasco County, both for its local citizens and the entire region for years to come by arbitrarily limiting the growth of Pasco Regional Medical Center (PRMC).

How, you may ask, is that possible? The answer is: Because policymakers, in trying to address one perceived problem, could cause another one unintentionally – unless they are very careful.

You see, some of the physicians who practice medicine and treat patients at PRMC own a small sliver (less than 9 percent) of this full-service community medical center. Some policymakers adamantly oppose this practice because they believe it provides physicians with an inappropriate incentive to increase utilization of services and thereby increase costs.

In sharp contrast, physician ownership at PRMC has allowed us to align our interests to control costs, improve quality of care and outcomes, and provide our patients with a more satisfying experience. (In some other communities, allowing physicians to own a small percentage of a full-service, community hospital has literally kept that hospital from closing.)

The appropriateness of allowing physicians to own hospitals and other facilities has been hotly debated in Washington and state capitals for a generation. However, as a hospital that has seen the benefits of this type of partnership, we want to share our story. The concerns raised by opponents are not applicable in the case of PRMC, where the physicians' aggregate ownership stake is very small. In fact, no single physician here owns more than 2 percent of the entire organization and the vast majority own less than 1 percent.

Today, Congress is considering a ban to prohibit physicians from owning hospitals. Recognizing that an absolute ban on any physician ownership might harm hospitals such as PRMC, federal legislators are weighing whether to "grandfather" those facilities that already have some physician owners. That is, those hospitals that extended ownership interests to doctors when it was permitted would be allowed to continue to have some physician ownership.

But there is a catch: To qualify for this “grandfather” provision, the hospital would have to agree that it would never increase its number of operating rooms, procedure rooms or beds.

At PRMC, we believe this focus on physician ownership in Congress is simply misguided, especially when it comes to full-service, community hospitals such as ours. We can’t predict the future, but we know our community will continue to grow. PRMC is dedicated to meeting the health care needs of the residents of Dade City, Zephyrhills, and surrounding communities now and in the future. We believe PRMC should be permitted to grow or evolve based on patient and community needs. Don’t you?

Once they hear our story and see examples of how well this type of partnership has worked, we believe our patients, the community, and Florida’s policymakers will agree with us.

Fortunately, two Members of Congress from Florida – Senator Bill Nelson and Congresswoman Ginny Brown-Waite, who represent Pasco County – can be our advocates in this debate. Senator Nelson serves on the Senate Finance Committee, while Rep. Brown-Waite serves on the Ways and Means Committee. From these posts, each will shape the health care reform legislation that will be considered by Congress later this year, and each will have tremendous influence on this physician ownership issue.

So, we urge Senator Nelson and Rep. Brown-Waite: Be our allies, and join us in this effort. Let PRMC meet the demands of our patients. Let us grow as needed with our communities. Oppose any provision that would harm PRMC and its ability to serve the community. The future of our health care is on the line.

If you want to help our cause by supporting our continued growth and service to our communities, please call or send an email to Senator Nelson’s and Rep. Brown-Waite’s offices asking them to support physician ownership of hospitals.

*--Stan Holm, Chief Executive Officer
Pasco Regional Medical Center*