As physicians, we must speak up for our patients

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While the future direction of our health care system has become one of the most debated issues in the nation, it is important that physicians are involved in the conversation to ensure that our patients do not lose the coverage that they depend on to live happier, healthier lives. This was the major focus of my speech this week at the AMA’s National Advocacy Conference, and certainly a topic addressed in President Trump’s remarks last night before a joint session of Congress.

The political landscape in Washington, D.C. has changed dramatically since last year. With a renewed debate about the role of government in the U.S. health care system, it is important for us to remember that we, the AMA, are a nonpartisan organization that works with both political parties to improve care for our patients and to improve the health of the nation.

As physicians, we approach this debate through the lens of our mission to work together for the betterment of patient health. This is rooted in sound medical ethics and scientific evidence, as well as the longstanding policies adopted by the AMA’s House of Delegates.

Physicians know that patients who do not have coverage live sicker and die younger. While the Affordable Care Act is not perfect, it has provided new coverage to 20 million Americans and has improved the health of our nation. Any reform proposal must preserve those gains and move us closer to coverage for all Americans.

In January, our CEO, James L. Madara, MD, wrote to Congress and the new administration to lay out the AMA’s vision for health system reform. Among the key points is a recognition that health system reform is an ongoing endeavor. We welcome proposals that make coverage more affordable and provide greater choice for our patients—and that also increase the number of those insured.

However, Congress should not take steps to repeal this law without telling the American people, in reasonable detail, what will replace the current policies.

As health reform advances, the AMA continues to urge policymakers to pursue improvements to health care, such as:

- Ensuring that individuals currently covered do not become uninsured and take steps toward coverage and access for all Americans
- Maintaining key insurance market reforms, such as coverage for pre-existing conditions, guaranteed issue and parental coverage for young adults
- Stabilizing and strengthening the individual insurance market
- Ensuring that low/moderate income patients are able to secure affordable and meaningful coverage
- Ensuring that Medicaid, CHIP and other safety net programs are adequately funded
- Reducing regulatory burdens that detract from patient care and increase costs
- Providing greater cost transparency throughout the health care system
- Incorporating common sense medical liability reforms
- Continuing the advancement of delivery reforms and new physician-led payment models to achieve better outcomes, higher quality and lower spending trends

Health system reform will remain a major focus of our work in 2017, because, as physicians, we stand in a unique position to advocate for our patients to ensure that the progress already achieved in coverage gains and increased access to care are not pulled out from under their feet. Whether advocating for our patients in the House of Medicine or before your elected officials in the Halls of Congress, I urge you to be an active voice in the health reform debate in our country today.