Together for Tomorrow: Manpower Issues



During the past several years, I have listened to discussion and debate and read many articles and reports on the issue of manpower within the health-care delivery system. No one can deny that the debate is triggered by economic issues. The globalization of the economy that has occurred over the past decade has been driven by the quest for cost containment and profit. No service field is immune to these fundamental economic forces, including health care. Both providers and recipients of health care are subject to the laws of economics, including the issue of manpower.

Each participant in our health-care system has particular demands. The public demands high-quality care, access, and choice, with an expectation of limited financial outlay. Business demands cost controls regardless of quality. Mainstream medicine demands quality, access, and new technology while insisting on reimbursement levels commensurate with the knowledge, skills, and training required of providers. Allied health-care providers demand a greater share of the market in the name of cost-effectiveness, quality, and access. The federal government, which claims to be the guardian of public health, demands the imposition of strict rules and regulations in the name of cost containment and quality. For all participants in the system, the primary driver of health care is economics.

Economic survival hinges on competition. Yet, in the field of health care, competition can have very detrimental effects on both the health-care delivery system and the economy. This is evidenced by the increasing number of Americans who are uninsured, the lack of access to basic preventive health care for minorities, the attrition and early retirement of health-care providers, the decline in the public's access to high-quality care, and the difficulty of many of our health professions institutions in attracting high-caliber applicants.

Podiatric medicine is not exempt from the laws of economic survival. Practicing podiatric physicians experience pressures from a demanding public, an overzealous government, and a profit-oriented insurance industry that mandates unreasonable regulations and reimbursement rates. They experience competition from within the profession as well as from other providers of foot and ankle care. Given that we must compete to survive, how objectively can we assess the future manpower needs of our profession?

Recently, the subject of the expected manpower needs in the field of foot and ankle care has been the focus of debate. The dictates of competition come into play in the question of who has the appropriate training to provide the best, most cost-effective care. On the other hand, we must consider the issue of an aging population that will strain the current manpower of the podiatric profession. Unfortunately, many of the articles and reports that have been published do not articulate a clear position on the issue of manpower requirements. The medical professions have not united to reduce the pressures brought to bear by industry and government. Rather, concern for individual survival has led many to target the colleges of podiatric medicine as the "scapegoat" with regard to the economics of competition.

I think this attitude is unfair. Many fail to see that during the past ten years, owing in part to the master plan of Project 2000, our colleges have maintained high standards for the acceptance of applicants. Many fail to see that during the past five years, owing in part to the law of supply and demand, the number of graduates has declined. Furthermore, many still fail to see the relevance of the Educational Enhancement Project and the plans for its implementation. Finally, many are not looking ahead to the future of our profession and what will become of our practices when we retire. Remember, economics is the driving force of health care.

No one, including myself, can predict the future manpower needs of our profession. I do know that if we are to be "Together for Tomorrow" in accepting the challenges of the current managed-care environment, common sense dictates the following:

- Each of us must be instrumental in the identification of high-quality applicants to our colleges of podiatric medicine. The pool of applicants must be sufficient to matriculate only the best.

• Each of us, as a graduate of a college of podiatric medicine, must actively articulate to the board of trustees of his or her college the need to focus on quality rather than quantity in enrollments.

• Each of us must begin to support our respective colleges of podiatric medicine financially if enrollments are to decrease. Remember that lost tuition revenues must be made up by other sources of revenue.

• Each of us must support the implementation of the Educational Enhancement Project. This support must be clearly articulated to the representatives of the Liaison Committee on Podiatric Medical Education and Practice.

Economics may be the driving force in health care, but we must take responsibility for ensuring our survival as a profession.

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