2013: Focus on Preserving Dermatology’s Gains

As another new year approaches, we are bombarded with lists—of both year-end reviews and predictions for the year ahead. In the medical field, perhaps the most significant development of 2012 was the Supreme Court’s decision that the “individual mandate” of the Affordable Care Act is Constitutional. Thus, the legislation stands.

The controversial ruling—first reported as a striking down of the law by some confused media outlets—came down five-to-four in favor of the mandate, provided that the fine on those who do not purchase insurance is treated as a tax. With the June 28 ruling, the law has moved forward, and new provisions take effect in 2013.

As for predicting significant events for 2013, that may be harder, but a new study suggests that the clinical landscape in the US will continue to change. According to the JAMA publication (2012;308(21):2241-7), general medicine physicians may be a disappearing breed.

Just one-fifth of internal medicine residents say they plan to pursue a career in general medicine, while others plan to pursue specialization. One assumes that physicians in training perceive specialization as providing enhanced opportunity for income. While specialists may, in fact, earn more relative to non-specialists, specialists face their own declining reimbursements. And any physician in training is wise to consider this fact.

Dermatology may not be much affected by a specialization boom, given the limited number of dermatology residency programs. Nonetheless, a lack of sufficient primary care providers could lead to an even greater delay in access to medical dermatologic care for some patients in this country. Given the current tenuous dermatology workforce situation, this could leave a significant number of patients without proper medical care for their skin diseases. At a time when we continue to recruit primary care physicians to be our partners in the diagnosis of early skin cancers, a shortage of these physicians could spell further problems for skin cancer rates.

Many changes are on the way for the healthcare sector, and we must be prepared to adapt and respond to ensure access to care and the best medical treatment for patients with skin diseases. Our specialty has come a long way in establishing our collective expertise. Let’s preserve our unique role in patient care.

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