

*The ADEA membership can have an enormous impact in this arena.*

*In this month's letter, Dr. Rick Valachovic, Executive Director of the American Dental Education Association, reveals how ADEA's members can take part in shaping the debate around health care reform.*



## **Harmonizing Our Voices: ADEA's Part in the Health Care Reform Debate**

In the midst of this unusually divisive political season, there's one thing on which almost everyone will agree: some kind of health care reform is necessary.

That's the message in Washington among advocacy groups across the ideological spectrum, even those who opposed and defeated the Clinton health plan in 1993. The message is surprisingly consistent: we need to address costs, we need to address access, and we need to address quality.

Last year, the ADEA Legislative Advisory Committee (ADEA LAC) crafted a policy statement, "[Oral Health Care: Essential to Health Care Reform](#)," to get out the message that ADEA intends to take part in the debate on health care reform and to make sure that oral health is on the agenda.

In June of this year, the ADEA Board of Directors approved the statement on an interim basis. The statement elaborates on six principles relating to the nature and delivery of health care services:

- The availability of health care, including oral health care, fulfills a fundamental human need and is necessary for the attainment of general health.
- The needs of vulnerable populations have a unique priority.
- Prevention is the foundation for ensuring general and oral health and for controlling costs within the U.S. health care system.
- The financial burden of ensuring coverage for health care, including oral health care coverage, should be equitably shared by all stakeholders.
- A diverse and culturally competent workforce is necessary to meet the general and oral health needs of our demographically changing nation.
- Our nation's domestic productivity and global competitiveness are negatively impacted by the huge and growing number of Americans without health care, including oral health care.

These principles represent core values that I believe we all share. Nevertheless, we may differ with others on how to achieve the goals implicit in these values. For instance, the American Dental Association (ADA) has also developed a set of oral health principles and will offer them in Resolution 38 on Universal Health Care Reform at the ADA House of Delegates in San Antonio this month. After comparing the policy statement approved by the ADEA Board of Directors with ADA's principles, we find similarities between the two documents, as well as notable differences.

The primary divergence is embodied in an ADA core principle that assumes that open and private markets can achieve equitable access to oral health for all Americans, including underserved and uninsured populations. While the dental private practice delivery system serves millions of Americans well, more than 130 million American adults and children have no dental insurance coverage. The daunting challenges that face the U.S. health care system, including oral health care, cannot be met successfully by reliance simply on economic market forces alone. Private markets are mechanisms for allocation of resources. When applied to health care, they provide care for those who can afford to pay for services, but little to none for those who cannot pay. By their very nature, private markets do not promise and will not ensure that every American has access to affordable diagnostic, preventive, and primary oral health care services. This core value is central to our policy on health care reform.

ADEA is inviting the entire membership to take part in vetting the policy statement, a process that will culminate in a vote on a revised policy statement by the ADEA House of Delegates at the 2009 ADEA Annual Session in March.

Those of you attending the ADEA Fall 2008 Meetings in Philadelphia this month will have an opportunity to discuss the issues around health care reform with other members and to contribute to data gathered through an automated response system. Your views on issues related to health care costs, access, and quality will be solicited, and in small group discussions you'll be invited to share your thoughts on the policy statement principles articulated above.

Taking the pulse of our membership in this way is so important, as we strive to build consensus around issues that are critical to the long-term health of our country and our professions. In recent years, ADEA has come to be viewed as [the voice for oral health care reform on Capitol Hill](#). Our success in this arena is due in no small part to the painstaking efforts of Jack Bresch, ADEA Associate Executive Director and Director of the ADEA Center for Public Policy and Advocacy, and his staff to engage ADEA members at every stage of the advocacy process.

While health care reform remains high on the list of concerns for most Americans, we heard a lot more about lipstick last month than we heard about oral health. With the upheaval on Wall Street, the conversation has shifted to the economy, but the central role that health care reform can play in assuring the nation's economic well-being has still not gotten the attention it so desperately needs.

The challenges that confront our nation have reinvigorated the electorate and sparked an earnest and animated debate about the best path forward for our country. Our democracy endows us with the ability to play a vital role in that debate... should we choose to do so. ADEA's leaders stand ready to step forward on your behalf to exercise this precious right, but first we need to hear from you. Please read [the statement](#), discuss it with colleagues, and if you won't be at the ADEA Fall Meetings, share your thoughts directly with [Jack Bresch](#).

I remain optimistic that the coming of a new administration of either party will create opportunities for meaningful reform and the incorporation of oral health into proposals to provide access and coverage. I'm also convinced that our membership can have an enormous impact in this arena. Although ADEA represents a plurality of voices, we have demonstrated our ability to harmonize and sing with one voice when we engage in advocacy efforts. As you prepare to exercise your rights in the upcoming general election, I urge you to also make your voice heard within our Association.



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