



David A. Wong, MD, FRCS(C)
Denver Orthopedic Clinic
Denver, CO

We now have a tangible lobbying success to validate NASS' new legislative direction on the Washington scene. Congress recently voted to fund a \$54 billion correction of Medicare physician reimbursement for 2003.

FROM THE DESK OF THE PRESIDENT

\$54 Billion – NASS Political Action In Action

We now have a tangible lobbying success to validate NASS' new legislative direction on the Washington scene. Congress recently voted to fund a \$54 billion correction of Medicare physician reimbursement for 2003. This infusion switches an anticipated 4.4% cut in physician's fees to a 1.6% increase!

Unfortunately, this action does not change the fundamentally flawed Medicare reimbursement formula. Rather, the additional funding corrects accounting errors that were identified when incorrect parameters were applied to the formula to calculate the 2003 fees. The two major errors found in the calculation were, first, a lower than actual number of Medicare beneficiaries and, second, use of a Gross Domestic Product figure that was less than the true value. Nevertheless, the \$54 billion "temporary fix" is a major accomplishment in NASS's new era of political advocacy.

In the new era, NASS has shifted focus from a largely informational "meet and greet" lobbying effort to a scenario of true political strategy. Rather than visiting one's local congressperson on the Hill, NASS' new lobbyists arranged meetings with the key congressional movers and shakers who had significant input into the Medicare funding legislation. For example, members of the NASS Board and the NASS Washington Committee held discussions with Rep. Bill Thomas (R-CA), chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee (who ultimately sponsored legislation in the House of Representatives), and Speaker

of the House, Rep. Dennis Hastert (R-IL) (who controls the legislative calendar and prioritizes bills submitted).

Another tactic in NASS' new political strategy was to go to Capitol Hill with an alliance of groups voicing a single common issue. Accordingly, NASS joined with 12 other professional medical societies representing specialty (not primary care) doctors in the Alliance of Speciality Medicine. This organization represents over 160,000 specialist physicians, a strong, unified voice that has succeeded in catching the ear of Congress. Until now, the only other medical organization that has carried this kind of clout is the American Medical Association (AMA) with about 260,000 members.

Last year's failure to pass Medicare funding legislation before Congress recessed for the fall elections also held lessons leading to adoption of a new, firm political strategy. It became clear that introduction of legislation late in the congressional cycle was a means for the politicians to placate physicians with an "I tried but couldn't get anything passed" excuse. In reality, anyone familiar with the process of proposing legislation realizes that no bill introduced close to the end of session has any realistic chance of becoming law. Accordingly, NASS and the Alliance kept pressure on members of the legislature as soon as the new Congress convened. The issue was kept on the table and was clearly not going away without some legislative action. Faced with persistent questioning and sound arguments that payment reductions would adversely affect access to care for Medicare patients, members of Congress

felt compelled to act. The \$54 billion to offset errors was the result.

The goals of the NASS political strategy when Congress reconvenes after the spring recess will be to attain a permanent revision of the Medicare reimbursement formula itself and to assure that meaningful professional liability reform is passed. The assistance of NASS members is crucial in these efforts. I urge members to lobby in their local constitu-

The goals of the NASS political strategy when Congress reconvenes after the spring recess will be to attain a permanent revision of the Medicare reimbursement formula itself and to assure that meaningful professional liability reform is passed.

encies on these issues. Additionally, a financial contribution to SpinePAC will allow the NASS Washington Committee and the Board of Directors to continue Washington based lobbying efforts in

conjunction with the Alliance of Specialty Medicine.

Please act today!