

## Workers Compensation

I'm not going to expound on the specifics of various upcoming legislative proposals on workers' compensation, as this is adequately addressed elsewhere in the medical and political press. As a physician who has treated pain management patients and set up several surgery centers over the past decade, I can personally attest to the undeniable value of workers' compensation insurance for work-related medical injuries. Also, as a physician, I have a hard time generating a huge reservoir of compassion for any bureaucratic and inefficient government system — as surely the California workers' compensation system has become. How, then, do I think about the fate of workers' compensation in California in the setting of an oppressive, statewide budget deficit? The answer is simple. Until we return to the independent days of cottage-industry medicine in America (a fantasy), we must do everything possible to keep the workers' compensation system intact and avoid additional and unnecessary restrictions on self-referrals.

Here's the problem. While we Americans enjoy the highest levels of medical care in the world (reference the fact that most of the world's rich and elite seek their specialty medical care here), we struggle to maintain World Health Organization standards in many categories because of the complexities of a heterogeneous society and relatively poor and uneducated, inner-city populations throughout the country. Because of the financial strain imposed by funding patchwork programs to cover the poor and medically under/uninsured, our healthcare national economy reveals its 'cracks' in times of national economic stress.

We must ride out the financial and

political storms induced by a struggling economy and preserve workers' compensation in its present form and substance because there are human beings — fellow citizens — on the line and because there is no viable alternative to allow continued medical care to the millions of affected American workers with work-related injuries. As an anesthesiologist who also treated pain management patients, I can personally attest to the absolute need and benefit of workers' compensation medical care. This care would not be possible in the setting of cutbacks in reimbursement to providers; this care will not be possible if we seek short-term, statewide gains in benefits cutbacks in order to fix the budget shortfall.

In the case of workers' compensation benefits, the cascade of negative repercussions to a benefit reduction would be monumental. Workers have families who need a financial provider. Workers, themselves, support a framework of productivity within their own companies and industries. Restricting workers' compensation benefits would be comparable to putting a cog into the wheel of economic recovery. No tax cuts could repair the negatively spiraling domino effect of workers' compensation benefit reduction on our national and state economies.

For the sake of every working American, the families they support, and the private institutions that employ them, the answer is clear regarding the workers' compensation benefit system. Workers compensation is a sacred cow we cannot afford to make into hamburgers. Ω

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