

## President Obama Addresses AMA House of Delegates Moments Ago

President Barack Obama moments ago concluded a one-hour speech to the AMA's House of Delegates in Chicago. In a very comprehensive address, asking for the physicians support of broad-based health system reform, the President addressed in a straightforward way the proposals he and key Congressional leaders have put forth. He emphasized the need to provide cost-effective health insurance coverage for all Americans and he detailed his plans as to how to pay for it. He reiterated his support for a public option to compete with private insurance plans and he challenged physicians and the AMA to address issues of over-utilization. He promised reform of the payment system and stressed the need for a preventive-oriented system; he specifically noted the need to encourage medical students to go into primary care fields. He closed by noting the historic opportunity the Congress has to improve the system and implored the AMA to work with his administration and the Congress so that the next generation of Americans are not still talking about the crisis in health care fifty years from now. To emphasize the point, he quoted from an article about the crisis in health care, written in Harper's Magazine in 1960.

Maine's AMA delegation, MMA President Stephanie Lash, former AMA President Robert McAfee, and EVP Gordon Smith are attending the meeting along with several specialty society delegates from Maine. The President's talk seemed to be well-received by the delegates and other AMA guests, although debate at the meeting has been quite vociferous on the issue of the public option.

We anticipating begin able to put the President's entire speech on the MMA website ([www.mainemed.com](http://www.mainemed.com)) within a day or two so will limit today's report to the following highlights.

- The President stated that he believed the total cost to achieve universal access, over the next ten years, would be about one trillion dollars, an amount, he also noted, less than the country is expected to spend on the war and recovery in Iraq.
- He drew loud applause when he stated that it was his intent to fix only what was broken in the system, and that persons who were happy with their own doctor would be able to keep that doctor, and likewise with respect to their existing insurance coverage.
- Those persons needing coverage would choose from several options through a health insurance exchange, similar to the process now extended to federal employees. A public plan would be one option.
- In order to cover everyone, the President said he was still open to the possibility of supporting a mandate that persons take responsibility for themselves and their families and be required to purchase coverage, so long as a waiver was available for those who could demonstrate that they could not afford any of the options. The Maine Medical Association has supported an individual mandate since 2003, with similar limitations.
- The President is also open to an employer mandate.
- The President came down very hard on the practice of some health plans to deny coverage on the basis of preexisting conditions, and promised to end the practice.
- Part of the payment for expanded coverage would come from reducing subsidies to Medicare Advantage plans and by limiting Medicare payments for preventable re-admissions to hospitals.

- The President cited the recent article by Atul Gawande, M.D. in the New Yorker magazine, as evidence of overtreatment in the system. While the article featured a town in Texas, President Obama stated that the pattern of overutilization was spreading across the nation.
- While rejecting caps on awards, the President did express support for liability reform that would address the issue of defensive medicine. That proposal is likely to be similar to the Liability Demonstration Project that Maine embarked on in the 1990's.
- The President stated that the nation needs to rethink the cost of medical school education and reward students who go into primary care and work in underserved areas. He cited his recent support for increased funding for the National Health Service Corps.
- The President noted a number of times in his speech his support for health care technology, the need for electronic medical records, etc.
- The President also noted his support for comparative effective research, in the interest of having physicians share with other physicians what works and what doesn't work. He emphasized here that he did not see this research as dictating what care needed to be provided.
- The President expressed support for expanding the membership and work of MEDPAC and promised to dust off some its previous reports to examine more closely over \$200 billion in savings the Commission had recommended which had never been accepted by the Congress.

In an emotional closing, the President stated that he did not believe that we, as a nation, would allow over 46 million Americans to go without coverage and exhorted the audience to work with him to ensure affordable health care coverage for all Americans. He noted that, for most Americans, their physicians are the health care system, and he asked again for the support of physicians at this historic juncture.