McCollum: PAs a 'Critical Part' of Expanding Access to Care

This column is part of a series of occasional interviews with members of Congress who have shown consistent support for PAs. Rep. Betty McCollum (D-Minn.) is serving in her third term. She is on the Education and Workforce Committee and the International Relations Committee.

We understand that you see a physician assistant as your primary care provider. How long has that been? How has he/she helped you live a healthy life?

For several years, I've had a physician assistant as my primary care provider. She has provided high quality health care and counseling on general preventive care.

Please tell our readers about some of your pro-PA initiatives in Minnesota, including your authoring of a bill in the state legislature in 1999 (which passed) that allowed PAs to provide care during disasters. What role do you see PAs playing in such situations?

The law I worked on in the Minnesota state legislature provides immunity from civil liability to physician assistants who are providing free volunteer care in disaster situations. The law also allows physician assistants to provide care in disasters without having physician-physician assistant agreements, as long as the physician assistants are appropriately supervised.

Physician assistants all over the United States often respond on very short notice to aid victims of hurricanes, fires, floods, and other disasters wherever they occur. If a community is in crisis and a patient needs care, PAs step up to the plate. They do this because of the profession's longstanding commitment to helping others.

What did you learn about the PA profession during your tenure on the state's Physician Assistant Advisory Council from 1987 to 1992?

Physician assistants play an important role in ensuring high quality and accessible health care. They are committed to providing care in underserved communities, such as inner cities and rural areas. PAs may even be the principal care providers in inner-city or rural clinics where there are a limited number of physicians. Their presence allows community members to access timely, local health care that helps keep our children, seniors, and other family members out of the hospitals so they remain productive members in their families and our community.

In addition, I've learned about the excellent accredited schools across the nation that provide outstanding opportunities for people who want to provide care for our families and become a PA. Many PAs have a variety of primary care specialties, such as general internal medicine, pediatrics, and family medicine. Other specialty areas include general surgery, emergency medicine, orthopedics, and geriatrics. PAs are involved in all aspects of providing health care.

Please share the evolution of your views over the years – as a businessperson, a government official, and a consumer – on the role that physician assistants play in delivering health care.

It is my job as a member of Congress to understand the roles of health care providers. Over the years, I've seen firsthand that PAs promote quality, cost-effective and accessible health care. Their presence helps free up a physician's time and contain the high cost of health care.

Additionally, the PA profession has a longstanding commitment to practice in our nation's small towns, rural areas, and underserved urban communities. When physician assistants establish a practice in our communities, it allows patients to access quality health care in a location that otherwise may be unable to support a full-time physician. As a consumer, I've come to realize that the more people we have participating in providing health care, the stronger and healthier our families and communities will be.

U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum

We're appreciative of what you've done to support PAs back home and elsewhere in the United States. What new opportunities do you see for promoting the role of PAs in delivering health care? What legislative priorities might there be for improving Americans' access to affordable health care?

Physician assistants have a very important role in promoting wellness, healthy lifestyle, and preventive medicine. They are also one of the many qualified professionals providing high quality health care and urgently needed humanitarian assistance around the world. There are more than 150 physician assistants currently serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. From helping tsunami victims to assisting refugees fleeing from war, PAs play a key role in providing humanitarian relief.

PAs can also play an important role in advocating for improved health care policy. As providers on the front line, both at home and around the globe, PAs have a real understanding of what is needed to ensure quality, affordable health care.

A debate has begun this year in Congress about what our health care system will look like in the future. The president has proposed deep cuts in Medicaid, which will result in many more uninsured families in our communities. I believe that access to health care, with programs like Medicaid and SCHIP, are cost-effective in that they allow access to preventive care and therefore save on emergency room visits and expensive treatment for illnesses too long ignored.

Other priorities should include promoting wellness by addressing our growing problem with obesity. PAs are often the most accessible provider to many families. They will continue to play an increasingly important role in educating others, both during office visits and in the public policy arena, about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. Finally, we need to do more to encourage young people to choose a health care career. Our nation is facing shortages across the spectrum of health care professions. I support increasing funding for Title VII of the Public Health Service Act, which helps to fund educational programs in medically underserved areas. Clearly, to have access to quality health care, we need to have well-trained professionals in all parts of the country, and PAs are a critical part of that goal.