The Critical Role of Neurologists in Our Health Care System
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The American Academy of Neurology Professional Association (Academy) recognizes the critical need for reform of the current US health care system. Too many US citizens do not have access to high-quality medical care because they lack adequate coverage, do not have the ability to pay for it, or lack access to the right medical professional at the right time. When access is available, unanswered questions remain about the quality of the care US health care consumers receive.

The Academy urges policymakers, as they develop, debate, and enact health reform measures, to consider the specific concerns of neurologists and the unique needs of patients with neurologic disease. This document is intended to provide an overview of the role of neurologists, the patients neurologists treat, the increasing demand for neurologic services, and the importance of assuring that reform proposals address concerns related to neurologic care.

Who is a neurologist?

A neurologist is a doctor with specialized training in diagnosing, treating, and managing disorders of the brain and nervous system such as stroke, Alzheimer’s disease, epilepsy, Parkinson’s disease, ALS, multiple sclerosis (MS), and traumatic brain injury (TBI). A neurologist does not perform surgery. Almost all neurologic conditions can be treated, but few are curable or preventable. Most require highly skilled long-term management to maximize the quality of life of patients and families.

The American Academy of Neurology Professional Association—an association of more than 21,000 neurologists and neuroscience professionals—is dedicated to excellence in patient-centered neurologic care through education, advocacy, and research. One of the main goals of the Academy, and paramount in the Academy’s advocacy efforts, is to ensure patient access to the right care. The Academy has demonstrated a commitment to quality through: (1) publishing more than 110 clinical practice guidelines; (2) developing quality measures; and (3) providing countless member tools and resources for practice improvement.

What is the practice of neurology?

Neurologists have specialized training to evaluate patient symptoms, diagnose whether a neurologic condition is present, and recommend or provide treatments to care, delay, or minimize the progression of the disease whenever possible. The majority of neurologic care is provided through evaluation and management (EM) services, also known as “cognitive care.” Cognitive care can best be described as physicians using their expertise and training to meet face-to-face with their patients to diagnose and manage their very complex chronic conditions. This is a time-intensive process, though it is not appropriately recognized in the existing reimbursement system.

Significant time and skill are required to discuss a new diagnosis of dementia, MS, Parkinson’s disease, epilepsy, ALS, or any other neurologic condition with a patient and family and then recommend treatment options. Neurologists have less time to spend with their patients due to the declining compensation for cognitive care. As a result, patients may experience reduced quality of care and have limited access to neurologic services.

Declining reimbursement for EM services is creating a challenge in attracting medical students into the specialty of neurology. US neurology residency openings are increasingly going unfilled; many of the openings are being filled by foreign medical students who are required to return to their home country upon completion rather than remaining here to care for US patients. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges, in December 2007, of the 1,590 neurology residents (590 (37.1 percent) were international medical school graduates (IMGs). This compares to 27 percent IMGs for all residents in US graduate medical education programs.

At present, there is approximately one practicing neurologist for every 18,000 Americans. Without an increase in the number of physicians entering the field of neurology, this number will decline to one neurologist for every 21,000 Americans by 2020. If current trends continue, there will be a shortage of well-trained neurologists to treat an increasing number of neurologic patients.

Why are neurologists important for the future?

With an estimated one in six people currently suffering from a neurologic disease, policymakers must help ensure there are properly trained clinicians available to provide high-quality care.

As baby boomers age, health care professionals will see an increasing number of patients living with neurologic conditions including dementia, stroke, epilepsy, Alzheimer’s, and Parkinson’s disease. For example, about five million Americans are currently diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, with the Alzheimer’s Association expecting that number to soar to 7.7 million by the year 2030. Parkinson’s disease affects more than 1 million people in the United States, with at least 60,000 new cases reported annually. This number is expected to grow dramatically as the population ages.

In the younger population, headache disorders and MS have a significant impact in terms of overall prevalence, disability, and economic burden. Thirty-five million people in the United States suffer from migraines.

Neurology by the numbers

- 1 in 6 people in the United States is suffering from a neurologic disease.
- Today, 5 million Americans have Alzheimer’s disease; 7.7 million are projected to have it by 2030.
- More than 1 million Americans have Parkinson’s disease, with at least 60,000 new cases reported annually.
- Someone has a stroke every 40 seconds in the United States.
- A majority of a neurology practice is spent on cognitive care, evaluating and managing the care of patients with chronic disorders.
- 58% of responding neurologists reported a reduction in cognitive-care compensation from 2000 to 2005.
- 50% of these neurologists said these compensation reductions would result in reduced quality of care; 70% believed that access to care would decline.
- In 2007, 37% of neurology residents were international medical school graduates, destined to return to their home countries.
- Currently, there is 1 practicing neurologist for every 18,000 Americans.
- By 2020 there will be 1 neurologist for every 21,000 Americans, even though the need for specialists will be significantly greater.

What are the policy considerations?

As a cognitive specialty, neurology shares many of the same issues that have led to the current crisis in primary care. Certain specialties and primary care physicians spend significant time managing chronic conditions which account for an overwhelming proportion of health care expenditures. Neurologic conditions require “principal care” services, which are defined by the American Medical Association as “ongoing preventive, diagnostic, curative, counseling, or rehabilitative care, provided or coordinated by a physician, that is focused on a specific organ system or disease/condition. Principal care may be provided concurrently with or apart from primary care.”

The inadequate recognition by payers to value time spent with patients in managing complex conditions creates disincentives for young physicians to enter the field of neurology at a time of increasing need for specialized care. The Academy believes that incentivizing primary care will lead to better coordination of care. However, reform must also recognize the role of principal care for patients with complex chronic conditions who are often cared for by their neurologist rather than a primary care physician.

Children also remain heavily affected by neurologic diseases. The Autism Society of America reports one child out of every 1.50 lives with this developmental disability. Add to the fact that NINDS reports 20 to 30 percent of children with autism develop epilepsy by the time they are adults, and it remains vital that neurologists remain accessible.
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Neurologists have specialized training to evaluate patient symptoms, diagnose whether a neurologic condition is present, and recommend or provide treatments to care, delay, or minimize the progression of the disease whenever possible. The majority of neurologic care is provided through evaluation and management (E/M) services, also known as “cognitive care.” Cognitive care can best be described as physicians using their expertise and training to meet face-to-face with their patients to diagnose and manage their very complex chronic conditions. This is a time-intensive process, though it is not appropriately recognized in the existing reimbursement system.

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Declining reimbursement for E/M services is creating a challenge in attracting medical students into the specialty of neurology. US neurology residency openings are increasingly going unfilled; many of the openings are being filled by foreign medical students who are required to return to their home country upon completion rather than remaining here to care for US patients. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges, in December 2007, of the 1,590 neurology residents, 590 (37.1 percent) were international medical school graduates (IMGs). This compares to 27 percent IMGs for all residents in US graduate medical education programs.

At present, there is approximately one practicing neurologist for every 16,000 Americans. Without an increase in the number of physicians entering the field of neurology, this number will decline to one neurologist for every 21,000 Americans by 2020. If current trends continue, there will be a shortage of well-trained neurologists to treat an increasing number of neurologic patients.

Why are neurologists important for the future?
With an estimated one in six people currently suffering from a neurologic disease, policymakers must help ensure there are properly trained clinicians available to provide high-quality care.

As baby boomers age, health care professionals will see an increasing number of patients living with neurologic conditions including dementia, stroke, epilepsy, Alzheimer’s, and Parkinson’s disease. For example, about five million Americans are currently diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, with the Alzheimer’s Association expecting that number to soar to 7.7 million by the year 2030. Parkinson’s disease affects more than 1 million people in the United States, with at least 60,000 new cases reported annually. This number is expected to grow dramatically as the population ages.

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