The American Academy of Neurology is a worldwide medical specialty society established to promote the highest quality patient-centered neurologic care. Comprised of more than 22,000 practicing and research neurologists, the Academy’s membership includes most of the neurology professionals in the United States complemented by several thousand neurologists from throughout the world.

The Critical Role of Neurologists in Our Health Care System
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.
- There is only one neurologist for every 19.8 generalists in the US.
- Patients consider MS-related care significantly superior when provided by a neurologist compared to other physicians.
- 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 2008, of the 1,693 neurology residents, 631 (37.3 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.
- 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 considerable 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.

Policies intended to reward the management and coordination of care of patients with complex chronic conditions should be directed to any physician who meets the criteria regardless of specialty designation.