THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF NEUROLOGY
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 25,000 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.

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The Critical Role of Neurologists in Our Health Care System
Who is a neurologist?

Neurologists are often confused with neurosurgeons who perform brain surgery. In reality, a neurologist is a doctor with specialized training in diagnosing, treating, and managing disorders of the brain and nervous system. 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 their families.

The American Academy of Neurology—an association of more than 25,000 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 AAN is to ensure patient access to the right care.

Neurology by the numbers

- 1 in 6 people in the United States is suffering from a neurologic disease.
- Stroke is ranked as the third leading cause of death in the United States.
- Alzheimer’s disease is ranked as the sixth leading cause of death 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.
- Between 2000 and 2008, Medicare payments for procedural services grew by 84 percent, while payments for cognitive care grew by only 48 percent.
- 58 percent of responding neurologists reported a reduction in cognitive-care compensation from 2000 to 2005.
- 50 percent of these neurologists said these compensation reductions would result in reduced quality of care; while 70 percent believed that access to care would decline.
- In 2009, 35 percent of neurology residents were international medical school graduates, destined to return to their home countries.
- Shortages of neurologists are well documented by longer appointment wait time and shorter visits with physicians.
- In the year 2050, Parkinson’s disease affects more than 1 million people in the United States, with at least 60,000 new cases reported annually. These numbers are expected to grow dramatically as the population ages.

What is the practice of neurology?

Neurologists have specialized training to evaluate patient symptoms, diagnose neurologic conditions, and to recommend or provide treatments to cure, delay, or minimize the progression of the disease whenever possible. This type of care is known as “cognitive care.”

Cognitive care, in contrast to care focused on procedures, 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 conditions.

What do we mean by ‘cognitive care’?

Cognitive care specialists are physicians with additional training in a specific field of medicine who primarily provide face-to-face care, also known as evaluation and management (E/M) services, to people with complex medical conditions. These conditions require a level of expertise which the referring physician is not trained to diagnose or qualified to treat. Cognitive care services are thought of as higher level E/M services needed to diagnose and manage complex and usually chronic conditions.

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. For that reason, health care policies that support primary care doctors must also recognize the vital role neurologists have in managing complex chronic conditions.

Patients with chronic neurologic conditions often are cared for by their neurologist rather than a primary care physician, because neurologists are specifically trained to manage chronic disorders of the nervous system. Yet, neurologists have not been recognized properly for the critical role they play in our health care system.

The inadequate recognition by payers of the value of cognitive care creates disincentives for young physicians to enter the field of neurology and results in workforce shortages at a time of increasing need for specialized care.

Moreover, the types of diseases neurologists spend considerable time managing account for an overwhelming proportion of health care expenditures.

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, over five million Americans are currently diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, with the Alzheimer’s Association expecting that number to soar to 16 million by the year 2050. Parkinson’s disease affects more than 1 million people in the United States, with at least 60,000 new cases reported annually. These numbers are 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. Importantly, patients consider MS-related care significantly superior when it is delivered by neurologists compared to other physicians.

Children also remain heavily affected by neurologic diseases. The Autism Society of America reports one child out of every 110 lives with this developmental disability. Add to that the fact that the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (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.

Congress must recognize and address the physical and economic toll of neurologic disorders, both now and in the coming years, as the number of older citizens increases dramatically and puts additional stress on our health care system.

Policies intended to reward the management and coordination of care of patients with complex chronic conditions should be directed to any physician who spends a majority of his or her time managing chronic conditions regardless of specialty designation.