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The critical role of NEUROLOGISTS in our health care system

Preserving our patients’ access to care
The American Academy of Neurology (AAN), the world's largest professional association of neurologists, recognizes the critical need to improve the current US health care system. Too many US citizens do not have access to the right medical professional at the right time. When access is available, unanswered questions remain about rising health care costs and the quality of the care US health care consumers receive.

The AAN urges policymakers, as they develop, debate, and enact health care policy measures, to consider the specific concerns of neurologists and the unique needs of patients with neurologic disease. This document provides an overview of conditions and patients neurologists treat, the increasing demand for neurologic services, and the role neurologists have in managing complex chronic conditions, which account for an overwhelming proportion of health care expenditures.

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

The American Academy of Neurology—the world's largest professional association of 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.

What is the practice of neurology?
Neurologists have specialized training to evaluate patient symptoms, diagnose neurologic conditions, and 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, in contrast to care focused on procedures."

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 provide. Cognitive care services are thought of as higher level E/M services needed to diagnose and manage complex and usually chronic conditions.

Why are neurologists important for the future?
Significant time and skill are required to diagnose neurologic conditions, talk over a life-shattering diagnosis, and then manage treatment options. Although cognitive care is time-intensive, it is not appropriately recognized in the existing reimbursement system.

Due to the declining compensation for cognitive care, neurologists have less time to spend with their patients. Consequently, patients may experience reduced quality of care and have limited access to neurologic services.

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.

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.

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. 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.

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.

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

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.

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Neurology by the numbers

- 20 to 30 percent of children with autism develop epilepsy by the time they are adults.

- MS-related care significantly superior when it is delivered by neurologists compared to other physicians.

- If current trends continue, there will be a shortage of well-trained neurologists to treat an increasing number of neurologic patients.

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