ASCO's Clinical Practice Committee

Striving to Better Serve and Respond to Members

By W. Charles Penley, MD

As 2008 winds down, we are given an opportunity to look forward to a new year and new initiatives. The Clinical Practice Committee remains engaged on many fronts, but I would like to take a moment at the beginning of this month's column to discuss efforts to expand the scope of our activities to better respond to the needs of ASCO members.

For many years ASCO has been an active advocate with the Medicare program, striving to influence policy in ways that benefit cancer patients and promote fair payment for drugs and services provided by oncologists. Only recently has the organization begun to develop relationships with medical directors of private health plans. In the last few years we have seen private payors demonstrate increasing interest in quality measures, outcomes measures, pay for performance, more efficient resource utilization, and other areas such as health information technology. Many payors have approached our organization for input on policy development as it related to these topics. ASCO has not in the past had a formal mechanism in place for dealing with private payor issues, nor has there been an active forum in which these discussions can take place. ASCO leadership has agreed that it is imperative that ASCO engage private health plans more directly on behalf of our members (within appropriate legal boundaries, of course), and steps have been taken to initiate this process.

Specifically, the Clinical Practice Committee is developing a proposal to bring together national ASCO leaders on practice and quality issues as well as state/regional affiliate leadership with medical directors from private health plans and other key stakeholders, such as large employers. The goal would be to identify and discuss common challenges encountered in the delivery of cancer care, working together to develop strategies for dealing with these challenges. The hope is that by establishing dialog and working together on an ongoing basis and in a proactive manner, ASCO can affect policy in ways that are clinically relevant and beneficial to our members and their patients. We imagine a wide range of topics for discussion: comparative effectiveness, imaging utilization, health information technology, quality measurement, practice guidelines, demonstration projects, and efficiency are but a few examples.

Moving ahead, we would like to be sure that there is ample opportunity for both oncologists and the payor community to have a voice in this process. It will be important for our agenda to be meaningful for our members as well as health plan representatives. I believe that this is an exciting new opportunity for ASCO and look forward to seeing positive steps forward in this arena.

On other fronts, during September and October the Clinical Practice Committee has provided oversight for both the Carrier Advisory Committee (CAC) meeting and the State Affiliate Leadership Conference. The CAC meeting is held annually in conjunction with our colleagues at American Society of Hematology and Society of Gynecologic Oncologists. This meeting brings representatives from various Medicare Part B carriers and Part A/B Medicare administrative contractors together with state CAC representatives to facilitate continued discussion on items related to the Medicare program. Of course, the transition to the regional Medicare administrative contractors for Part A and Part B has been a major topic of discussion, and given the structural changes that are taking place in the administration of the Medicare program, it is likely that the structure of the CAC meeting itself will change over time. The State Affiliate Program is of major importance to ASCO, as it is through these affiliates that our national organization keeps its finger on the pulse of practicing oncologists in all parts of the nation. I really appreciate all the hard work that goes into making these conferences successful and the amount of time that ASCO volunteers contribute by participating.

Finally, I will say a word about elections. It is November, and much is to be decided this month. For the past 2 years we've been inundated with coverage of the national elections—issues have been dissected and mud has been slung! Remember, though, more is at stake than the Oval Office. There are offices all over this great land that are decided by general election, including that of the ASCO president and board of directors. My plea is that all citizens/members exercise their right to vote, for it is this right that gives each of us a voice in our governance.

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