

Introduction

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As clinical laboratory professionals, we are well aware of the importance of maintaining our technical knowledge and competence. Most of us are diligent about reading journals and attending continuing education programs to keep abreast of the advances in our field. However, many of us overlook, or in some cases intentionally avoid, the governmental and regulatory issues that impact the practice of clinical laboratory science. We often hear colleagues say they aren't very political or they are not interested in politics and the government. Some even confess that they don't see the connection between the practice of clinical laboratory science and governmental or regulatory affairs. Still others recognize the impact but prefer to leave those issues for "someone else" to address.

Having a basic understanding of the governmental and regulatory issues that impact reimbursement of laboratory services and how we practice clinical laboratory science is critical to practitioners. Governmental regulations dictate how (and how much) we are reimbursed for our services, as well as how and by whom those services will be provided. Knowledge regarding these issues arms us and prepares us to be better citizens and advocates for our profession and improving the quality of healthcare.

The ASCLS Code of Ethics states that practitioners and members have a duty to the patient, to colleagues and the profession, and to society as a whole. Certainly this requires technical and ethical competence, but it also requires that we be advocates on behalf of the profession to "uphold standards of practice, to

seek fair socioeconomic working conditions for practitioners, and to assure high standards of care." The final statement in the Code of Ethics emphasizes our duty to "comply with relevant laws and to try to change those which do not meet high standards of practice." The Code of Ethics clearly suggests that clinical laboratory professionals have an obligation, to not only practice competently, adhering to the highest ethical and moral standards, but also to advocate on behalf of the profession to assure the highest standards of care.

Advocacy is essential to educate and influence political leaders regarding the issues that face the laboratory community. This may require contacting members of Congress or state legislative leaders. It should certainly influence our decisions regarding the election of political leaders. Advocacy may involve responding to proposed legislation or regulations by providing important information regarding how a piece of legislation or a proposed regulation might affect the way laboratory services would be provided in your community. A phone call or email can be critical in helping political leaders appropriately shape legislation or regulations. Or your input may influence them to support or oppose certain legislation. As an expert in the field of clinical laboratory science, your experience, expertise, and opinions matter.

Advocacy is not, however, limited to the legislative and regulatory arenas. Advocacy is essential in our workplaces and in our communities. One problem that has chronically impacted clinical laboratory professionals is the fact that the public and, sadly, even some health care practitioners are unaware of the critical role clinical laboratory professionals play in health care delivery. It is incumbent on us to "be the face" of the laboratory. Practicing competently, while enhancing our consultations with physicians, other health care providers and patients, is certainly an important aspect of gaining this visibility. But "moving the walls" of the laboratory by serving on committees and becoming involved in our communities is also important. Through such involvement, clinical laboratory professionals can demonstrate, model, and educate others regarding who we are and the critical role we play.

The purpose of this Focus series is to provide critical background information regarding how the government operates

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and the governmental and regulatory issues that are currently impacting the clinical laboratory science profession. The three articles were selected to highlight:

- the laboratory-related acronyms and abbreviations that comprise the federal government alphabet soup
- the impact of Medicare on the laboratory
- the clinical laboratory fee schedule

The first article clarifies the many acronyms found in reading relating to governmental issues. Receiving adequate reimbursement for services provided is essential to the operation of every laboratory. Thus, understanding how Medicare works and reimburses is important, not only because Medicare beneficiaries comprise a rapidly growing segment of the population, but also because many private payers model their policies after the Medicare system

We hope the information provided will encourage and empower clinical laboratory practitioners to become stronger and more active advocates for our profession.

Paula Garrott and Judy Davis are the Focus: The Government and You guest editors. They are the Co-Chairs of the ASCLS Government Affairs Committee, ASCLS, 6701 Democracy Blvd, Suite 300, Bethesda, MD 20817, Attn Government Affairs, 301-657-2768, 301-657-2909 (fax)

Clin Lab Sci encourages readers to respond with thoughts, questions, or comments regarding this Focus section. Email responses to westminsterpublishers@comcast.net. In the subject line, please type "CLIN LAB SCI 22(2) FO GOVERNMENT". Selected responses will appear in the Dialogue and Discussion section in a future issue. Responses may be edited for length and clarity. We look forward to hearing from you



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