

# From the President: A Little Patience Pays Off

**Mark Schiller, M.D.**

As we approach our 2004 Annual Meeting, I realize I have been involved with AAPS for a decade now.

I have been founder and president of the California chapter, a national AAPS Board member for six years, and most recently have had the honor of being president of AAPS. It's a good time to reflect on these 10 years.

There have been frustrations—not from working with AAPS but rather from the daunting task of moving the medical system toward the free practice of private medicine. Like many others in AAPS, I have logged countless hours and spent quite a bit of money traveling to meetings, writing articles, lecturing to colleagues and the general public, debating on television and radio, and trying to convince others to join our cause.

Often I feel as though I must be walking around with a big bruise on my forehead from banging my head against a wall. On a systemic level, managed care still exists, Medicare still imposes nonsensical administrative rules and underpays physicians, medical care and health insurance appear too expensive, and politicians are always ready to impose socialized medicine.

On a professional level, many of our colleagues spend the greater part of their days complaining about the state of medicine, their ridiculous administrative burden, their reduced incomes, the depredations of malpractice attorneys, the bullying that they have to endure from hospitals and insurers, and the loss of respect from the general public. You can show all of the successes of AAPS and present these physicians with a way to fight, yet so many just continue to complain loudly and don't take any action.

I'm often reminded of one of my most frustrating moments. I had just finished giving a talk on medical economics and ethics at a community hospital. Afterward, a local physician approached me, told me that he enjoyed my talk, and agreed with my points about the evils of bureaucratic medical systems and the need for market reforms. I suggested that if he agreed, he should really join AAPS and help to promote reforms. His response? His own practice was doing reasonably well, he had been able to deal with managed care for the moment, and he didn't need to join AAPS "yet."

This viewpoint is all too common: Don't fight now. Wait until you need AAPS to help you. By then it may be too late. It was all that I could do to refrain from screaming at him.

Yet, when I look back on the last 10 years, AAPS and our allies really have had an effect. I still believe that the successful AAPS lawsuit against the Clinton administration's "healthcare taskforce" derailed a movement that was steaming toward a nationalized medical system. While pieces of the Clinton health plan have since been implemented in piecemeal fashion, we are a long way off from all being forced into a nationally mandated system of so-called managed competition.

AAPS has been very active and notably successful in the legal arena, largely thanks to the untiring efforts of Andrew Schlafly, our general counsel. In these cases we have not only helped to defend individual physicians—something I don't see any other medical association doing—but we have also helped to stave off detrimental legal precedents.

It was also through the efforts of AAPS, which proposed and lobbied for a Medicare private contracting bill, that physicians now have the ability to opt out of Medicare and to contract privately with seniors who choose to see them. Given this ability, and given the level of dissatisfaction with Medicare that is causing 20 percent of family practitioners to decline new Medicare patients, there is some hope for change.

Perhaps the most promising development is the rising acceptance of Health Savings Accounts (HSAs). AAPS has been promoting the concept of medical savings accounts for years. I can't even count how many times I've lectured or written about the concept over the last decade. It's such an obviously sensible, simple, effective concept that you expect that everybody who hears about it will understand it and immediately advocate it. What a disappointment when this doesn't happen! Nonetheless, there is good news. HSAs are law, significant companies like Lumenos and Definity have been founded to offer HSAs and high-deductible insurance plans, and even large plans like United Health have moved into the market. An increasing number of companies like Whole Foods and other entities like the University of California are offering HSA plans. The news media, often goaded by the sometimes heroic efforts of Kathryn Serkes, AAPS media director, are reporting on the success of such plans.

The example of the slow but increasing success of HSAs is my main point here. A large part of my frustration over the years has really resulted from my misperception of the rate of change. I expected that if I just presented a good idea, people would rush to implement it, and change would come quickly. That's just not realistic. After decades of neglect and suppression, a free market in medicine cannot be reestablished overnight.

It is very much a matter of perspective. As I stand back from the immediate assaults on private medicine and look back on the last 10 years, I can see that our side has made some advances, and I can also take pride that AAPS has played a significant role.

I hope that all our members will renew their efforts in fighting the good fight. Just have a little patience, enjoy your family and professional satisfactions, and recognize that the reward for your struggles to change the system will not come instantly.

AAPS President **Mark Schiller, M.D.**, is a psychiatrist practicing in San Francisco. He may be contacted through [www.drmarkschiller.com](http://www.drmarkschiller.com) or at [mschillr@itsa.ucsf.edu](mailto:mschillr@itsa.ucsf.edu).