

MediGRAM

Cigarette tax hike answer to medical assistance deficit?

By Steve Busalacchi

If there were a way to magically eliminate Wisconsin's smoking-caused Medicaid costs, the deficit in the medical assistance program would disappear too.

Unfortunately, the reality is that the \$800 million deficit in Wisconsin's two-year MA budget is almost equal (\$750 million, according to the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids) to the amount of money taxpayers spend over that period treating the poor for smoking-caused health care costs.

Suffice it to say, health costs are public enemy number one when it comes to assessing the state budget crisis, accounting for half of the projected \$1.6 billion deficit. So Susan Turney, MD, Wisconsin Medical Society CEO/EVP, hopes the Governor and Legislature will at least consider a cigarette tax increase to raise revenue and discourage smoking. The CDC estimates that smoking costs Wisconsin \$7.14 per pack, while the state's cigarette tax is less than \$1 per pack.

"Given that smoking is responsible for such a massive amount of health care spending, raising the cigarette tax seems entirely appropriate," said Dr. Turney.

A legislative campaign to raise the cigarette tax by \$1 per pack is underway. And if successful, it would continually bring in an estimated \$500 million over two years. That projection, based on the experience of other states that raised their cigarette tax, would also lead to a 17 percent decrease in youth smoking.

Still, Governor Doyle worries that the tax would unfairly hit poor people who already are struggling financially. "Raising taxes may place a greater economic burden on



low income smokers," says Patrick Remington, MD, Director of the Wisconsin Public Health & Health Policy Institute, "But the public health benefit of these policies will also be greater among those with less ability to pay higher prices for cigarettes." Furthermore, some of the revenue could fund quit smoking programs for the poor so they eventually wouldn't have to pay the tax at all.

Although Governor Doyle is opposed to all tax increases, he seemed to suggest recently that a cigarette tax might be the least objectionable tax. "If there were any (tax) that I think you could justify on good policy, it would be a cigarette tax," Doyle told Wispolitics.com in a December 30 story.

Steve Brenton, president of the Wisconsin Hospital Association, says it is politically feasible to pass a cigarette tax increase, pointing to three states that did just that following voter referenda last November.

"Wisconsin's current tobacco tax of 77 cents is significantly less than the national average," Brenton wrote to his members November 19, "and Medicaid payment rates are among the lowest in the nation."

SmokeFree Wisconsin, which is coordinating the effort, says physician involvement is crucial to the campaign. It recommends doctors contact their state legislators and urge them to support \$1 per pack increase in the cigarette tax, dedicating the revenue to health services for the poor.

To get involved, log on to www.smokefreewi.org or contact the Society's Jeremy Levin at 866.442.3800 ext 3791 or e-mail jeremyl@wismed.org.

2004 a good year for political activism

Contributions to the Wisconsin Medical Society's political action committees topped the \$100,000 mark in 2004. Physicians and other members directed more than \$65,000 in individual contributions to candidates through their WISMedDIRECT accounts, and WISMedPAC contributed \$40,000 to political candidates. The contributors helped ensure the protection of your patients' and your practices' interests in the Capitol by making the medical profession's voice heard.

Now is the time to prepare for the 2006 election cycle. You can contribute to WISMedPAC/ WISMedDIRECT on-line through the Society's new, secure e-commerce site (<https://store.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org/donations/index.cfm>). Enter your personal data, or contact the Membership Department (membership@wismed.org) to receive the username and password needed to access your personal account. You can also contact Joyce Hart at 866.442.3800 ext 3765 or e-mail joyceh@wismed.org.

Upcoming Events

Disorders of the Estate Plan: Jan 25, 4:30 p.m., 1000 N Water St, 21st Floor, Milwaukee. Co-sponsored by Wisconsin Medical Society Insurance and Financial Services and Reinhart Boerner Van Deuren s.c., this seminar will address estate planning techniques valuable for physicians, latest developments in state and federal laws, the 10 biggest weak spots in retirement plans, and how to respond to IRS and Department of Labor threats. Registration fee: \$20. Contact Courtney O'Herrin, 414.298.1000 or e-mail coherrin@reinhartlaw.com.

Wisconsin Medical Society Board of Directors: Special Meeting Jan 26, 6:30 p.m., Society Headquarters. Contact Linette Colón Herron at 866.442.3800 ext. 3704 or e-mail linettec@wismed.org.

Wisconsin Medical Society Foundation Application Deadlines: Amy Hunter Wilson Scholarship—Feb 1; Summer Fellowship in Government and Community Service—Feb 15; all other scholarships—April 1. Contact Eileen Wilson at 866.442.3800 ext. 3722 or e-mail eileenw@wismed.org.

Wisconsin Medical Society Executive Committee: Feb 18, Noon-2:30 p.m. Contact Linette Colón Herron at 866.442.3800 ext. 3704 or e-mail linettec@wismed.org.

Membership Committee: Feb 18, 2:30-3:30 p.m. Contact Kris Hebel at 866.442.3800 ext. 3712 or e-mail krish@wismed.org.

Finance Committee: Feb 18, 3:30 p.m. Contact Noreen Krueger at 866.442.3800 ext. 3904 or e-mail noreenk@wismed.org.

Board of Directors: Feb 19, 8 a.m. Contact Linette Colón Herron at 866.442.3800 ext. 3704 or e-mail linettec@wismed.org.

Wisconsin Medical Society Annual Meeting: April 15-16, Monona Terrace, Madison. **Deadline for Resolutions** to be included in House of Delegates handbook is Feb 17. Contact Linette Colón Herron at 866.442.3800 ext. 3704 or e-mail linettec@wismed.org.



Wisconsin Medical Society

Your Doctor. Your Health.

www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org

More GME funding sought in run for AMA Council

By Steve Busalacchi

“Train and remain” is the mantra Mahendr Kochar, MD, recites in his campaign to win a seat on the AMA’s Council on Medical Education. The slogan refers to poorly funded Graduate Medical Education, which Dr. Kochar contends is the key to attracting and maintaining an adequate physician workforce in Wisconsin, but that remains inadequately funded.



Mahendr Kochar, MD

Doctor Kochar is no stranger to medical education issues, having served as Associate Dean of Medical Education at the Medical College of Wisconsin for the past 17 years and being co-author of *Concise Textbook of Internal Medicine*. Having earned board certification in internal medicine, family practice, geriatrics, nephrology, clinical pharmacology, medical management, and clinical hypertension, Dr. Kochar practices what he preaches with respect to medical education.

“Education is the centerpiece of our profession,” he says. “Therefore, GME must be better funded to train the physicians needed in our country.” With the population aging, Dr. Kochar sees a greater demand for doctors and a shortage of physicians in certain specialties, unless we create incentives for new doctors to practice here.

In Wisconsin, for example, Dr. Kochar says up to 60 percent of newly trained doctors stay in the state to practice their specialty, so it makes good sense to attract more of them through stronger GME programs.

Doctor Kochar’s endorsements for the Council include the Wisconsin Medical Society, the North Central Medical Conference, the American College of Physicians, the American College of Cardiology, and the American Association of Physicians from India.

The election will be decided June 21 at the AMA House of Delegates meeting in Chicago.

Car raffle benefits grants program

You could soon be driving a 2005 Ford Mustang or Toyota Prius (hybrid) for as little as \$100. The Wisconsin Medical Society Foundation’s first automobile raffle is just one way the Foundation is celebrating its 50th year as the not-for-profit affiliate of the Wisconsin Medical Society. Bergstrom Corporation has made these cars available.

Raffle proceeds will launch the Foundation’s Grants Program, which focuses on awards for innovative programs that promote healthy lifestyle choices. The Foundation’s goal is to award \$50,000 in 2005.

A maximum of 1000 tickets are available at \$100 each. The winning ticket will be drawn during the Foundation’s Celebrity Charity Roast April 14. The winner must be at least 18 years old and need not be present to win.

Tickets may be purchased on-line at www.store.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org or by clicking on the Foundation page or by calling 866.442.3800.