



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF  
COLLEGES OF OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

July 13, 2011

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Vice President Joseph R. Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President and Mr. Vice President:

On behalf of the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine (AACOM) which represents the nation's 26 colleges of osteopathic medicine, offering the doctor of osteopathic medicine (DO) degree at 34 locations in 26 states, I respectfully urge you to protect graduate medical education (GME) and oppose any potential funding cuts to GME.

I understand the fiscal situation our nation is facing and that hard choices need to be made to return this country to sound financial footing. In this process it is apparent that severe cuts to GME are currently under consideration. If we are to maintain the physician training infrastructure, it is important that you protect GME, the bedrock of physician training and a determinant of the current and future quality of health care.

As you know, Medicare funding provides the principal financial resource for the training of medical residents. A well-trained physician workforce is essential to ensuring Americans have access to care. This is particularly true of the primary care workforce, where research has shown that access to primary care lowers costs and improves health outcomes. Adequate GME programs, including Medicare GME, Teaching Health Center (THC) GME and Children's Hospital GME, are necessary if we are to assure that the U.S. health care system has a sufficient number of well-trained physicians to ensure that patients will receive quality health care. Such support is particularly needed as we work to transform the U.S. health care system to one that is patient-centered, team-based, and prevention-focused.

Today, more than 19,000 students are enrolled in osteopathic medical schools. Nearly one in five U.S. medical students is training to be an osteopathic physician. It is important to note that many current osteopathic medical students will pursue careers in primary care and many will practice in rural and underserved areas; the areas that already face shortages of primary care providers. The number of osteopathic medical school graduates is growing and is expected to continue to rise in response to physician workforce shortages that exist and are projected to increase over the next five to 15 years. Appropriate GME funding is essential to the training of primary care and all other physicians.

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The Medicare GME program currently receives approximately \$9.5 billion annually, which is used to fund an already insufficient number of residency slots each year. Cutting funding for GME programs would result in fewer future physicians being trained and, ultimately, fewer patients being treated. Evidence shows that because residents often begin their medical careers in a geographical location near where they trained, fewer local physician residents could result in fewer local primary care physicians.

The Teaching Health Center GME program, authorized by the Affordable Care Act (ACA), is uniquely positioned to address some of these access concerns. AACOM can speak directly to the importance of this program as many of our members are educating osteopathic medical students in rural and underserved areas and many of our graduates ultimately practice primary care. THCs will train primary care residents in community-based settings, where many will go on to practice. This program holds the promise of helping to increase the number of primary care physicians training and staying to practice in rural and underserved community-based or ambulatory settings—where needs exist and are projected to grow dramatically.

The Children's GME program supports the training of approximately 40 percent of all general pediatricians and pediatric specialists. The small amount of federal dollars that support this program supports 60 percent of the general pediatric workforce. Reducing the funding to any of these GME programs would be devastating to the patients these physicians serve and to the entire health care system.

A variety of factors are driving the need for greater numbers of physicians to serve the nation's public — current and projected physician workforce shortages; 32 million newly insured individuals resulting directly from the Affordable Care Act; an aging population and a concomitant rise in the incidence of chronic disease; and new models of care aimed at providing more accessible, more affordable care to more Americans. To meet these challenges, we need more, not fewer, future physicians in training.

As Congress continues its negotiations, AACOM is ready and willing to work with the administration and Congress to find fiscally responsible ways to reduce our nation's deficit. We are also willing to engage with policy-makers on more efficient use of the funds that are available. But it is very important to recognize that if we are to meet the challenges posed by an aging population with high incidence of chronic diseases, we must increase, not decrease, physicians in training. I urge you to support the training of future osteopathic physicians and the health care system they serve by protecting GME and opposing any cuts to this vital funding.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important matter.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. Shannon".

Stephen C. Shannon, D.O., M.P.H.  
President and CEO