



AMA LOOKING FOR LEVERAGE

Negotiating units and relaxed antitrust laws. Both represent the latest efforts by the American Medical Association (AMA) to provide leverage for physicians in their negotiating battles with managed care.

The AMA negotiating unit is available for the one in seven physicians employed by hospitals or health plans. For independent physicians, the AMA is promoting a measure in Congress that would allow doctors to negotiate collectively under certain conditions.

News that the AMA intends to develop a national labor organization to represent employed physicians has met with raised eyebrows. Will doctors employ the traditional union trump card and strike to press their side? The AMA claims its collective bargaining unit will follow the principles of medical ethics and not strike or endanger patient care.

The intent is to attack insurance company practices that do not offer patients and physicians reasonable contract provisions. So, while the AMA collective bargaining unit would address physicians concerns, patients would be the real winners.

Just One Tool

The bargaining unit isn't the only tool in the AMA arsenal. It's communicating directly to patients and federal lawmakers through advertorials placed in national and local newspapers and in the Capital Hill newspaper, *Roll Call*. Advertorials directed toward patients explain the AMA's position in negotiating with managed care companies. Those targeting legislators urge passage of HR 1304, a bill proposed by Rep. Tom Campbell (CA) that would relax antitrust laws to allow physicians to bargain collectively.

Other programs, which operate through private sector advocacy programs in individual states, address physician needs and fight for similar laws that allow collective bargaining.

The efforts are not without critics. Health insurers have fired back, aiming at every American's weak spot: the pocketbook. For example, the Health Insurance Association of America predicts dire consequences for consumers, including higher costs, higher numbers of uninsured and higher premiums.

The notion of a labor union also doesn't rest well with some physicians who often support the underlying need for negotiation leverage but are uncomfortable with the union label. AMA officials assure physicians that the Hippocratic Oath will provide the guiding principles behind which doctors organize.