

PRIMARY CARE LEADERSHIP IN THE PUBLIC POLICY ARENA

Summary article based on a presentation by Senator (Ga) Don R. Thomas, MD at the Fifth Annual Primary Care and Prevention Conference, September 21–23, 2005.

This closing session commentary focused on the role primary care providers can take in shaping public policy for health care. As a physician and lawmaker, Dr. Thomas provides living examples of how the two can intertwine for better health care for all populations. He has practiced family medicine in Dalton, Georgia for almost 50 years and is serving his fifth term in the Georgia Senate, representing District 54 in the northwest area of the state. (*Ethn Dis.* 2006;16[suppl 3]:S3-47–S3-48)

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INTRODUCTION

Physicians, nurses, and other medical professionals can make an impact on the quality of health care by becoming active in the community and the political arena. Although tremendous advances in medicine, pharmaceuticals, and patient care has been made in the last 45 to 50 years, every patient needs a good, knowledgeable, well-trained, caring, and compassionate primary care physician. That physician also needs to be involved in community activities, civic groups, church activities, educational activities, and professional associations.

According to Dr. Thomas, the only physician in the Georgia legislature, physicians should be politically involved in helping elect good candidates to local, state, and national offices, and in setting healthcare policies. Dr. Thomas' political career began in 1972 when he was elected to the Whitfield County School Board. He was chairman of the board from 1974 to 1984.

As a state senator, Dr. Thomas is chairman of the Health and Human Services Committee; secretary of the Education and Youth Committee; and a member of the Appropriations, Ethnic, and Rules Committees. He was a leader in the passage of Georgia's Clean Air Act and co-sponsored Senate Bill 3, the legislation that brought tort reform to Georgia.

In another example demonstrating how the primary care physician can use advanced medical knowledge, sophisticated public health research, and citizen groups to affect change as needed in health policies, Dr. Thomas cited recent state legislation, the Medical Practice Act. The Act controls the licensing of physicians and every aspect of medical practice and the legislature directs the expansion of privileges for physicians, physician's assistants, nurses, optometrists, chiropractors, podiatrists, and others.

WHERE AND HOW CAN PRIMARY CARE PROFESSIONALS MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Three ways that physicians and others in the primary healthcare field can make a difference:

- Become involved in the Medicaid/PeachCare for Kids prescriptive coverage debate in Georgia or in a similar issue in your state.
- Be involved in reaching the underserved, uninsured, and underprivileged individuals who need health care.
- Support your political representatives and educate them about your needs. Consider running for office in your city or state.

PRIMARY CARE LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC POLICY

Good health policies and partnerships can ensure that people receive the health care they need, as demonstrated by examples such as the Northwest Georgia Health Care Partnership, the Women's Commission on Health, the Men's Commission on Health, and community health fairs or initiatives such as the blood pressure detection program that conducts screenings in churches, barbershops, and beauty salons in Savannah, Georgia.

Dr. Thomas urged the audience to become involved in community-based policy efforts to develop programs and partnerships that will eliminate the more than 50% of all deaths that researchers say are preventable or can be delayed for

many years. The healthcare community should be active in efforts to prevent deaths from tobacco, obesity, drug addiction, AIDS, drunk or drugged driving, and a sedentary lifestyle. In addition, diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and most types of cancer can be prevented or delayed through education, prevention, and detection procedures such as mammograms, colonoscopies, and prostate-specific antigen (PSA) tests.

Looking ahead to the 2006 legislative session, Dr. Thomas prioritized his work in three areas: 1) additional tort reform; 2) the obesity problem, especially among children; and 3) increases in the cost of prescription drugs.