Avoiding the “dog days” of health care

The dog days of summer are here. I heard that expression on the radio the other day and decided to look up its origin. I shouldn’t have been surprised to learn that it has little to do with dogs but instead dates back thousands of years and refers to a roughly six-week period of hot and sultry weather in July and August associated with the conjunction of the sun and the star Sirius (the “dog” star). OK, that’s explains the dog part.

I read where the phrase is also used to refer to any period of stagnation or languid activity—and that’s what really caught my attention.

If you have been reading my Viewpoints over the past 10 months, you may have picked up on a theme. Much of my writing has dealt with our collective strength as physicians (to say nothing of the respect our profession still holds with the public) to reshape health care into a system that makes sense for us and for our patients.

Although we have seen both the Minnesota and the U.S. Supreme Courts support principles we believe are vital to a robust health care system, the flawed implementation of law, the burdensome over-regulation of practice and the competing actions of strong third-party payers continue to frustrate physicians.

In my view, our only reasonable recourse is vocal activism. Much of what frustrates us now is the result of well-intended decisions made without consideration for how they will play out. These decisions just add or shift cost without actually achieving measurable improvement. We have to stop playing the game that way. We lose and so do our patients.

I know we can find workable solutions to health care’s problems if physicians make the commitment and get involved. Nobody understands how the system should work and how the important pieces should be connected better than we do. For us to do that, we need to work together.

The MMA needs the engagement and, quite frankly, financial support from all physicians in Minnesota if we are to succeed in making the state the best place to practice medicine. We need to partner, not compete, with our specialty societies. We need all oars in the water, pulling hard in the same direction. If we do nothing, the results won’t be pleasant.

Talk with your colleagues. Encourage discussion and debate. Join us in September at the Annual Conference in St. Louis Park. Fight back against stagnation. Our profession’s future depends on it.

As always, let me know your thoughts. I appreciate the feedback I have had from many of you over the past year. Let’s ramp it up.

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