

Letters to the Editor

PHYSICIAN COMPENSATION: SPECIALISTS VERSUS PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIANS

To the Editor:

I found the article "1997 Compensation for Emergency Medicine Physicians, Psychiatrists, and Neurologists" (Cejka S: *Hospital Physician* 1999;35 [2]:50-52) interesting and well-written. However, unless readers were willing to do the math to determine compensation increases for primary care physicians and specialists, the article was somewhat misleading. I refer to the following:

Throughout the past 5 years, compensation for primary care physicians increased 9.26%, jumping from \$124,282 in 1993 to \$135,791 in 1997. Specialists, however, did not fare as well. Between 1993 and 1997, specialists' compensation only increased 6.34%, climbing from \$207,331 to \$220,476.

In fact, the income gap between primary care physicians and specialists actually increased, going from \$83,049 to \$84,685.

This increase reflects what I believe is a persistent trend in medicine despite the lip service paid to primary care. Procedures typically performed by specialists that are highly valued when new, difficult, and innovative retain relatively high reimbursement levels even when these procedures become more routine and

common. In addition, new lucrative procedures (eg, stenting) to be performed by a specialist are always discovered. Meanwhile, the Federal government "nickel and dimes" primary care physicians to death by knocking level five reimbursements down to level four reimbursements because we neglected to ask a car crash Medicare victim about a recent skin rash.

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In reply:

I thank Dr. Larson for his letter. His points that specialists earn more than their primary care counterparts and that the dollar amount of specialists' income increases is far more than increases for primary care physicians are absolutely right. The annual compensation increase for specialists is greater than that for primary care physicians. My point, however, was that primary care physicians' compensation is increasing at a higher rate than specialists' compensation. Although primary care physicians will never be paid like some specialists, the annual rate of increase for primary care physicians reflects their pivotal role in today's healthcare marketplace.

Sue Cejka

Founder and President

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