



CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF
FAMILY PHYSICIANS
STRONG MEDICINE FOR CALIFORNIA

For Immediate Release
October 13, 2009

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Family Physicians Protest Governor's Veto of Bill Designed to Help Solve Dire Primary Care Physician Shortage

AB 657 (Hernandez) Would Have Helped Prepare California for Health Care Reform

Sacramento – California's largest primary care physician organization today condemned Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's veto of a bill its leaders say would have saved lives and relieved emergency room overcrowding. "Access to health care is an issue of life and death," said Carla Kakutani, MD, a past president of the 7,000-member California Academy of Family Physicians (CAFP). "The Governor is shirking his duty to protect Californians. He's already demonstrated his commitment to healthcare reform, but he's forgotten that reform simply will not work unless patients can obtain health care by qualified primary care physicians when they need it."

CAFP co-sponsored Assembly Bill 657, authored by Assemblymember Ed Hernandez (D – Baldwin Park), to establish a Health Care Workforce Taskforce to create a master plan to address the urgent shortage of primary care doctors and the under-representation of Latinos, African Americans, and others among those ranks. The Latino Coalition for a Healthy California co-sponsored the bill.

In his veto message, the Governor expressed sympathy with the undersupply of primary care physicians in the state, but said that AB 657 duplicates efforts already under way. "Existing law is peppered with nice-sounding efforts to address the dire primary care physician shortage," said CAFP President-Elect Jack Chou, MD. "These primarily have to do with collecting or disseminating information, not actually making a blueprint for the state's future healthcare workforce needs. Without action or at least a plan of action, it's just talk."

"More than three million Californians – nine percent of our population – already live in areas federally classified as Primary Care Health Professional Shortage Areas, and significantly more live in non-designated areas with poor or no access to primary and preventive care services," said Kakutani. "Research has shown that adding just one primary care physician per 10,000 people contributed to a three to ten percent decrease in deaths. Studies also show that patients with access to primary care doctors suffer from

fewer and less severe cases of chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease. The math is simple, but the Governor seems to lack the political interest to act on it.”

The prospect of national health care reform makes addressing the primary care doctor shortage even more urgent, Chou said, because soon millions more people will be able to afford to seek care. “Gaining health insurance coverage without having access to a doctor will be no gain at all,” he said.

“While we are disappointed that our bill has been vetoed, we can view this as a vast improvement over the fate of last year’s version, which died in appropriations,” said Chad M. Silva, JD, policy associate with the Latino Coalition. “Advancing the bill to the Governor’s desk is an achievement that we plan to build upon in the coming session.”

Improving Patients’ Health by Increasing Workforce Diversity

A state as rich in racial and ethnic diversity as California needs to increase not just the number, but also the diversity of its primary care physicians and the teams of health professionals they direct, Chou said. “Research shows that culturally proficient care improves communication between patients and doctors and often affects the outcome of care,” he explained. “In our state, where Latinos make up 30 percent of the population, they are only five percent of our doctors. African Americans make up eight percent of our general population, but only three percent of our physician population. By planning for the future of health care and the future of students across the state, we could vastly improve these numbers.”

Whether finding ways to train and recruit more primary care physicians, “ways to eliminate the extraordinary bureaucratic delays in the State’s medical licensing process, or ways to improve population health, we must act now,” he said.

“The costs of convening a Health Care Workforce Taskforce would have been minimal,” said Kakutani, “but the costs of allowing millions of Californians to suffer without adequate access to primary care services are incalculable. This is more than a missed opportunity – this is gambling with people’s lives.”

About the California Academy of Family Physicians

With more than 7,000 members, including active practicing family physicians, residents in family medicine, and medical students interested in the specialty, CAFPP is the largest primary care medical society in California. Family physicians are trained to treat an entire family’s medical needs, addressing the whole spectrum of life’s medical challenges. FPs serve a broad base of patients in urban, suburban and rural areas, often in California’s most underserved areas.