

Barbara A. Hummel: Congress must protect doctors struggling during the COVID-19 crisis

Posted on Tuesday, May 5, 2020

The column below reflects the views of the author, and these opinions are neither endorsed nor supported by WisOpinion.com.

I've been a family physician for over 30 years. My passion to this day remains the same: interacting with patients and making a difference in their life and health. As a self-employed physician, I treasure the ability to build and maintain strong relationships with all of my patients. Serving patients is what keeps me practicing medicine at age 75 even under the dangerous and difficult circumstances we currently face.

But across the country, doctors, clinicians and other frontline providers are facing a long-term financial crisis threatening our ability to deliver care to the patients that depend on us. Although it was the right move for hospitals and clinics to postpone or cancel elective surgeries and non-essential care to stop the spread of the virus, many physicians depend on the revenue from these elective treatments to keep the doors open.

Doctors have reported revenue falling anywhere between 50 and 90 percent. A recent survey of primary care providers indicated that as many as 20 percent of physicians believe that they will be forced to close their doors for good in the next month.

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

As the former president of the Wisconsin Medical Society, I've come to know many of the heroic healthcare workers across our state. Many of them are struggling to

keep the doors open amid this crisis and have seen patient volumes drop drastically.

UW Health and UnityPoint Health, which owns Meriter Hospital in Madison, have postponed 5,800 surgeries and reduced daily patient visits by 50 percent. As a result, the system has been forced to reduce pay for doctors, cut hours and furlough some non-essential staff. Even with these cost-cutting measures, the organization expects to lose \$400 million in revenue from March to June. Aspirus Health System, which operates several hospitals across the state, has also been forced to furlough workers.

The virus is taking a massive toll on the emergency departments that have seen an uptick in COVID patients. Many emergency departments have been forced to stock up on increasingly expensive medical supplies and devices, including PPE and ventilators. ER doctors and clinicians are working around-the-clock treating patients suffering from the virus and are routinely exposing themselves to infection.

Physicians and other providers in Wisconsin deserve praise for their willingness to help the most vulnerable. But more importantly, they need the resources and financial support to continue to treat patients. Unfortunately, Congress has not done enough so far.

Shockingly, many in Washington don't know that most physicians aren't employed by hospitals. In fact, most doctors either own their own practices or are members of larger physician networks that send them to hospitals that need a certain type of specialist. As a result, frontline physicians received little of the aid that Congress allocated for hospitals and clinics in the COVID-19 relief bill passed in March.

Thankfully, Congress and policymakers in Washington have a chance to fix their mistake. Our elected officials must ensure that doctors are protected financially in the next COVID relief bill. The administration can also instruct the Department of Health and Human Services to allocate enough financial support to doctors from the last COVID aid package.

I urge Congress to take all the necessary steps to protect our frontline doctors, nurses and healthcare workers. People seeking medical care should not have to worry about whether their local private practice, emergency room or clinic has the resources to stay open during a global pandemic.

-Dr. Barbara A. Hummel is a board-certified family physician in private practice in Greenfield. She served as president of the Wisconsin Medical Society from 2016-2019.