MASSACHUSETTS MEDICAL SOCIETY

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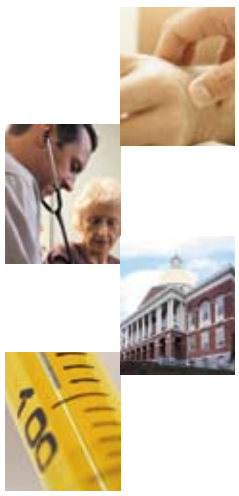

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HHS Secretary Says Use Data to Improve Patient Care

BY TOM WALSH

In a wide-ranging interview with *Vital Signs*, JudyAnn Bigby, M.D., Massachusetts Secretary of Health and Human Services, outlined her programmatic priorities of supporting health care reform, expanding access to primary care, addressing ethnic and racial disparities, and improving MassHealth.

Dr. Bigby also expressed concerns about how health plans currently compile and use data to rank physician performance, saying, "It would be nice if we could come to some agreement on principles to give confidence to providers and the public that the information being reported is actually good and relevant." Highlights of her interview follow:

Health and Human Services Secretary JudyAnn Bigby, M.D.

WEB EXCLUSIVE!

Want more excerpts from the interview with Dr. Bigby? Go to **www.massmed.org/bigby** to read her comments on health care reform, Medicaid, access and workforce issues, and ethnic and racial disparities.

Health Care Reform. Dr. Bigby cited the immediate challenge of treating people newly enrolled in health insurance plans who've long gone without routine health care or who were putting off treatment they needed because they couldn't afford it. She said she would not be surprised if this situation resulted in a short-term upswing in cost.

Access to Primary Care. She said the flood of new patients into the system raises concerns about whether there are enough primary care doctors to see them all. Dr. Bigby favors increased funding for community health centers so they can offer doctors education loan forgiveness as an incentive to practice primary care.

Ethnic and Racial Disparities. Resolving this problem, Dr. Bigby observed, requires community-based solutions. "For example," she said, "the prevalence of obesity and type 2 diabetes does relate in part to whether there are safe places to exercise and whether people have access to affordable, healthy food."

MassHealth. Dr. Bigby expressed hope that the efficiency of the state's Medicaid system can be improved, especially with the new Medicaid Management Information System. "I'm very concerned about the rate of denials for claims," she said.

Comments on Tiering. While she believes "some good" can come from the current system of using insurance claims data for physician ratings, Dr. Bigby also said she understands concerns raised by the MMS and others about the quality of the data being used by health plans participating in the Group Insurance Commission (GIC) physician "tiering" program. The GIC manages health benefits for nearly 300,000 state employees, retirees, and their families and has embraced a controversial system of physician tiering as part of a strategy to save money and ensure quality.

"I do think there are limits to administrative data that were designed for billing and reimbursement purposes and not to measure quality," Dr. Bigby said.

> *"If data is not reported to providers in actionable form, we miss opportunities to improve quality."*
>
> – HHS Secretary JudyAnn Bigby, M.D.

Dr. Bigby emphasized that physician ratings must be based on sound data to be useful to health care consumers. She promised to use her role as chair of the state's Health Care Quality and Cost Council — which is charged with publicly disseminating comparative cost and quality information — to provide solid information that allows people to make good health care decisions. Dr. Bigby said, "I think being clear about how many individual things you need to count in order to make a measurement valid… is very important. I think understanding the implications of what you're measuring and [ensuring] that it really reflects something that is clinically

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MMS Applauds as Blue Cross Says No to GIC

BY TOM WALSH

The MMS applauded a recent decision by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts not to do business with the state Group Insurance Commission (GIC). The decision was a business decision, driven largely by the insurer's concerns about the GIC's approach to physician tiering.

"The state's largest insurer has taken an important stand to ensure that transparency efforts in ranking physicians be based on accurate, reliable, and timely data," said B. Dale Magee, M.D., MMS president. Dr. Magee said the GIC deserves praise for calling attention to cost and quality issues. However, he said Blue Cross's decision demonstrates what the MMS has long maintained — that the current GIC initiative does not provide an accurate or reliable picture of physician performance.

Blue Cross specifically cited problems with tiering individual physicians rather than groups. "The measures available to tier individual specialists are unreliable," a Blue Cross press release said.

Dr. Magee said a proper rating system can only be fashioned by stakeholders working together. "For health care to achieve its potential for quality and efficiency, data needs to be shared between plans and physicians. Physicians must be able to use it to better a patient's care."

The Society's House of Delegates adopted principles for rating systems at its 2007 Interim Meeting (see box on page 2).

Push for Principles Expanding

Meanwhile, five major health insurers in New York — including four nationwide carriers — are embracing a similar set of principles established by state Attorney General Andrew Cuomo. They include

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