THE BILINGUAL ENDORSEMENT PROGRAM FOR PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS

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ISSUE:

As of 2007, there were 2,603,244 individuals in Illinois that spoke a language other than English at home. Of these, 1,177,007 spoke English less than "very well." Limited English proficiency (LEP) individuals often access the health care system with no interpretative services or through the utilization of ad hoc interpreters. However, ad hoc interpreters average about 31 errors per clinical encounter, with 63% of these errors resulting in potential clinical consequences. Not only does this take an enormous toll on the health of Illinois's residents, but it also represents a financial drain on our health care system. The endorsement of bilingual physician assistants is designed to increase accessibility to health care services to LEP individuals, reduce costs to Illinois's health care system related to language barriers or interpreter errors, and to improve the overall health of all of Illinois's residents.

PROPOSED ACTION:

Amend section 15 of the Physician Assistant Practice Act of 1987 to include a new section (b) as follows:

(b) It shall be the policy of the State of Illinois to improve the quality of health care by providing a career pathway for Physician Assistants interested in serving as bilingual interpreters. Beginning on January 1, 2012, the State Medical Licensing Board shall establish and implement a bilingual Physician Assistant endorsement, to be known as a Physician Assistant bilingual endorsement. Persons who meet the requirements of and successfully complete the requirements of the endorsement established under this Section shall be issued a Physician Assistant bilingual endorsement for serving in medical centers in this State. The endorsement shall be a career path endorsement but not a restrictive endorsement available to: (i) Physician Assistants who are certified through the National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters; (ii) Physician Assistants who have completed at least 1 year of work as a medical interpreter; (iii) Physician Assistants who have completed an undergraduate or master's degree in any foreign language study; (iv) Physician Assistants who have graduated from a high school in a country where a language other than English is spoken; and (v) Physician Assistants who can demonstrate oral proficiency in a language other than English. A Physician Assistant who meets any of these clauses (i) through (v) of this Section shall be deemed to satisfy the requirements for the Physician Assistant bilingual endorsement. The State Medical Licensing Board may adopt rules that are consistent with this Section and that the State Medical Licensing Board deems necessary to establish and implement this Physician Assistant bilingual endorsement program.

RATIONALE:

Physician Assistants play an integral role in our health care system. They work in a wide array of health care settings and help provide medical care to often underserved populations in underserved regions. Physician Assistants work under the guidance of a physician and have the capability to perform many of the tasks that physicians normally carry out. Yet, their presence helps reduce waiting times and increases patient-provider contact time that physicians can normally not provide, which is critical to patient understanding and compliance. The presence of qualified medical interpreters often helps aid many issues associated with language barriers in health care, but their presence does not serve as a substitute for shared language and for developing a patient-provider bond. Thus, the amendment of section 15 provides an entry point in increasing the availability of bilingual primary care providers in Illinois.

PLEASE SUPPORT THE AMENDMENT OF SECTION 15 OF THE PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT PRACTICE ACT OF 1987.