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Society head hopes to close care disparity

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For The Patriot-News

As the nation debates the meaning and impact of health care reform, the new president of the Dauphin County Medical Society, elected in January, hopes to improve health care locally for low-income and minority residents.

Dr. Gwendolyn Poles said she wants to see that level of care raised in Dauphin County and across the state.

Researchers uncovering why socioeconomic status affects health outcomes have pointed to such "discouraging factors" as how doctors interact with different ethnic and racial groups, less aggressive care for heart disease among certain groups and underrepresentation of minorities in health care professions, Poles said.

"There's the commonality in culture and language which can impact patient adherence and, hopefully, health outcomes," Poles said.

Poles, 56, is a Philadelphia native who has been in Harrisburg for 20 years, since she came to work at Hamilton Health Center.

She serves on the faculty of PinnacleHealth's Internal Medicine Residency Program. She lives in Lower Paxton Twp. with her husband, Kenneth Corker, a retired printer. She has a stepdaughter and three grandchildren, ages 16 to 26.

What impact do you see from health care reform?

I'm speaking for myself and not the Dauphin County Medical Society. I fully understand why there is such fierce debate about, quote-unquote, health care reform. At the same time, I find it tragic that states, including Pennsylvania, are going to utilize taxpayer dollars to challenge mandatory health care coverage. States mandate that everyone has car insurance, so it's more important to have car insurance than health insurance. As much as I share the concern about how this is going to impact our budget, I'm not sure that doing nothing wouldn't impact our budget even more.

By no means do I think this is a perfect bill, but it's a critical starting point. When Social Security and Medicare were passed, they were not perfect, and they were adjusted over the years. Insuring the 35 million uninsured is more important than some of the objections that have come forth, and they can be corrected over time if there are legitimate objections.

What can be done locally while national issues are hashed out?

That's my question, as well. My desire as president of the Dauphin County Medical Society is to address health care disparities in Dauphin County. We can be looking at the educational system and asking what can we do as doctors to encourage more minorities to enter health care. One effort underway is teaching health care practitioners through community health care events to be more culturally competent, so when we're delivering to a patient population different than our own, we're more effective and looking at better methods of following up. We see people in the office, give a list of instructions, and say come back in three

months. The patient is overwhelmed. How can we do a better job of giving health care and information regardless of their background?

Why does it matter that everyone be healthy? Studies have shown that when people are healthy, they're more productive. When you have an unhealthy person, it impacts the economy, and health care costs are higher. Sometimes people ask the question in the context of people needing to take responsibility for their own health. I don't disagree with that. But oftentimes when that is said, people are not aware of the challenges others face.

Take someone who is severely depressed and has no access to care and has limited resources. They say, "Why are you spending \$5 on a pack of cigarettes?" But they don't know that nicotine is an antidepressant. It's the only way they get through their days. When you're talking to a substance abuser, you say, "Stop using." Easier said than done.

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