

Capitol Health Call

Congress to Address Shortage of General Surgeons

Identical bills aimed at identifying US communities with the greatest need for more general surgeons have been introduced in both houses of Congress as the country's general surgeon population continues to decrease (<http://bit.ly/2aHMOBk>; <http://bit.ly/2azllEm>).

Rural and other medically underserved areas have been most affected by an overall physician shortfall caused by population growth, the chronic care needs of an aging populace, and a heightened patient load due to the Affordable Care Act (<http://bit.ly/10UvrlI>). However, the need for surgeons is especially acute. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges, the number of general surgeons, which was 39 100 in 2000, is projected to decrease to 30 800 by 2020.

"If you fall from the barn or are injured in a tractor accident in rural Iowa, there are no general surgeons available nearby to evaluate [your internal injuries] let alone perform surgery to treat them," said Sen Chuck Grassley (R, Iowa) in a statement (<http://bit.ly/2aATbkV>). He co-sponsored the Senate bill with Sen Brian Schatz (D, Hawaii), while the House bill was sponsored by Rep Larry Bucshon (R, Indiana).

The bipartisan legislation, which directs the Department of Health and Human Services to identify areas of the United States that are undersupplied with surgeons and designate them surgical Health Professional Shortage Areas, is supported by the American College of Surgeons

The act would provide "a roadmap for identifying general surgery shortage areas and the tools to develop a plan for addressing those shortages," said David B. Hoyt, MD, executive director of the ACS, in a statement (<http://bit.ly/2aATbkV>).

Republicans Critical of White House for Zika Reaching the United States

The spread of Zika virus to domestic US mosquitoes might not have happened if the Obama administration had been more vigorous in warning US residents against travel to countries where Zika is widespread, ac-

ording to Rep Lamar Smith (R, Texas), chairman of the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee.

Noting the increasing number of Zika infections in the southeastern United States that authorities say were transmitted by local US mosquitoes, which acquired the virus by biting infected travelers on their return, Smith's office issued a statement that said: "These cases could have been averted or at least minimized if the administration had issued more explicit level 3 travel restrictions on certain countries earlier this year" (<http://bit.ly/2agoChm>).

It is the second time that Smith has been critical of President Obama for not going beyond level 2 alerts that advise travelers to "practice enhanced precautions." In June, Smith led 17 House Republicans in urging the president to order the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to issue level 3 warnings to avoid nonessential travel "as it did with the Ebola virus in West Africa."

Cancer Moonshot Stalls on the Launch Pad

When Congress adjourned in July for its 7-week recess, it left President Obama's heavily touted Cancer Moonshot up in the air.

The House Appropriations Committee advanced its National Institutes of Health (NIH) funding bill without approving the seed money the White House is seeking for the billion-dollar project "to cure cancer once and for all." Although the Senate Appropriations subcommittee was on board with giving the NIH an increase of \$2 billion, with an additional \$1.39 billion for Alzheimer disease research, it left unfunded a proposal to give the agency \$680 million in 2017 to ramp up the moonshot (<http://bit.ly/2aTpicL>).

On the House side, the National Cancer Institute would receive a 2.4% increase in funding, far short of the 13% increase the White House was seeking. An amendment offered by Rep Rosa DeLauro (D, Connecticut), a cancer survivor, to add \$750 million to fully fund the Cancer Moonshot in 2017, failed to pass. Rep Tom Cole (R, Oklahoma),



Congress proposes bills to identify communities hardest hit by shortages in general surgeons.

chair of the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies subcommittee, said he did support the funding in principle but wants to first review the NIH's detailed plan for the moonshot scheduled to be released in December.

Giving Police Alternatives to Lethal Force

Following the recent wave of police shootings involving unarmed black men, 2 Louisiana congressmen, Garret Graves (R-La.) and Cedric Richmond (D-La.), have reached across party lines to draft legislation that would give law enforcement officers more tools to avoid using deadly force.

Their bill, which goes to the House Judiciary Committee, would authorize the US attorney general to create a federal Office of Non-Lethal Technologies and Techniques. The office would work with the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Defense, and related agencies to develop techniques and strategies police could deploy to control a situation without using their firearms (<http://bit.ly/2aAvBFq>).

The congressmen say they introduced the bill in response to the recent fatal shooting of Alton Sterling, a black man, by police as he was pinned to the pavement outside a store in Baton Rouge (<http://bit.ly/2aEzv07>). – Jeff Lyon