

OPINIONS

BE OUR GUEST: ALLEN M. SPIEGEL and A. HAL STRELNICK, medical educators



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Support efforts to boost diversity in health care

Congress is on track to eliminate one of the nation's most effective initiatives for increasing diversity and reducing disparities in health care. We urge our representatives to protect these essential programs at medical schools across the country.

In the coming weeks, Congress will finalize the federal budget for 2007.

For nearly 30 years, federally supported Title VII has funded enrichment efforts, such as the Health Careers Opportunity Program and Center of Excellence at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, that prepare minority and disadvantaged students for medical school or other vital health professions training.

Such funding has allowed many students to pursue what might otherwise have been an unattainable dream and has also benefited communities where "health" and "disparity" are too often paired. Eliminating Title VII funding, as Congress is poised to do, will effectively terminate these programs and all they have achieved.

A typical HCOP offers high school students laboratory research experiences and precollege science enrichment courses, as well as mentoring, peer support and advising. COEs nurture and mentor the students

in these programs to encourage them to enter the health professions. To date, these programs have helped at least 500,000 aspiring health professionals nationwide, including more than 400,000 underrepresented minorities.

The co-director of Einstein's Hispanic Center of Excellence, Dr. Elizabeth Lee-Rey, is herself a product of these programs and exemplifies their success.

Today she energetically leads and oversees a variety of outreach efforts aimed at reducing disparities in minority health care and at attracting and training more minority physicians. She also serves as an assistant professor in Einstein's department of family and social medicine.

One of the programs supported by Einstein's Center of Excellence offers minority students in seventh through 12th grades in local Bronx schools the chance to take part in the Einstein Enrichment Program.

The program enhances the students' science and language skills and introduces them to medical research by teaming them with faculty mentors. Another mentorship program teams minority college students with doctors and other health professionals.

Another important program funded

through the HCOP is a student-organized free health clinic where medical students, under faculty direction, provide health care to about 1,000 people of all ages who lack health insurance. Known as the Einstein Community Health Outreach clinic, it was the first student-organized free health clinic in New York City.

The success of such programs is widely acknowledged. A study published recently in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that HCOP participants were three times more likely to enter medical school than nonparticipants.

A recent survey conducted by the Association of American Medical Colleges found that without Title VII funds, 83% of HCOP and COE programs will shut down, opening large gaps in the fragile medical education pipeline.

Without programs such as Title VII that identify, prepare and encourage minority youths, our physician work force will not reflect the nation's growing diversity.

Eliminating federal support for Title VII is a step in the wrong direction in the uphill battle to end health care disparities.

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