

September 26, 2001

The Honorable Neil Abercrombie
1502 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Abercrombie:

On behalf of the 115,000 physicians and medical students of the American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine (ACP-ASIM), I am writing to encourage your support for a series of proposals that will slow the increasing growth in the number of uninsured. Prior to the tragic events of September 11, the number of uninsured totaled 43 million. That number will be even larger due to: the loss of coverage by the families of the deceased or those seriously injured in the attack; those who lost jobs because of the economic slowdown, in general, and as a result of the attack specifically; and the double digit percentage increases in premiums that are expected next year.

The Congress has already demonstrated its concern for the uninsured in the Congressional Budget Resolution, establishing a \$28 billion reserve fund to extend health insurance to a portion of the uninsured. While the \$28 billion is not enough to solve the problem, it reflects the will of the Congress to begin in a significant way to reverse the trend of increasing numbers of uninsured. The efforts of the Senate Finance Committee to reach an agreement on how the reserve fund should be spent could provide a basis for determining the best ways to provide additional funding for the uninsured.

The ACP-ASIM supports a variety of approaches to reduce the number of uninsured. Additional funding is needed to provide SCHIP coverage or Medicaid to parents; to simplify enrollment in both programs; and provide transitional coverage for up to 24 months for Medicaid and SCHIP enrollees who experience improvements in their economic situation that could cause them to lose eligibility. The state of New York has taken similar but more limited steps to assist its residents, and Secretary Thompson has pledged his support for those actions. Tax credits are another way to increase coverage and should be considered.

An additional step that ACP-ASIM has recommended in the past, and is particularly relevant now given the recent terrorists attacks, is to provide subsidies to purchase health insurance for those who have lost their coverage due the attack itself or current economic conditions. Loss of one's job often means loss of coverage. We propose subsidies for the purchase of COBRA coverage since the individual bears the full cost of COBRA and may be unable to afford it without assistance.

We are cognizant of the need to address the security needs of the nation, including the threat of bioterrorism. There is nothing more important. Still, the increasing numbers of uninsured present a clear danger to our nation's health. Congress' commitment to provide funding for the uninsured should not vanish.

Sincerely yours,

William J. Hall, MD, FACP
President