

November 11, 1996

During the past six years, it has become an absolute necessity for the Florida Radiological Society to become politically active in its State Capital. The FRS would like to share some of its experiences and thoughts with other state chapters with the hope that they will benefit before they are faced with similar crises.

In 1991, the ACR Bulletin pointed out that the future of Radiology would depend on our input into legislation and our involvement in legislation on the state level. How true. That was the same year the Florida Legislature imposed a 1.5% tax on net operating revenues for free-standing imaging centers, radiology offices and radiation oncology facilities. The following year the Florida Legislature established a fee cap on non-Medicare radiology services not to exceed 115%. We effectively changed this bill the following year, but it required more money and time than anticipated. That was also the same year Florida was faced with the self-referral bill and was the first state to have it passed. The years 1991 and 1992 got the attention of the Florida Radiological Society and its members, and certainly got my attention as Chairman of the Florida Radiological Legislative Committee. We suddenly became seriously interested and involved in state politics.

Whether we like it or not, medicine, including radiology, has become a matter of politics. The leadership of ACR recognized this some time ago and has effectively been a voice in Washington, DC. We on the state and local levels need to also recognize this in order to protect our specialty.

Physicians, and radiologists in particular, often are not inclined to be "pro-active" in political matters. It is our basic nature to be problem solvers, and we function most effectively by narrowly focusing on the needs of our patients. As a consequence, many of us are poorly equipped to deal, on a daily or a continuing basis, with the constantly changing forces at play in the political arena. Most of us would prefer to be left alone to pursue our practices, but the political realities will no longer allow us to remain passive.

Things have happened to us in Florida, and they are too numerous to list. They will continue to happen to us and other states until Radiologists join together effectively with our input, membership and financial support in the state chapters. The 1.5% tax on our diagnostic and radiation oncology practices was not placed on any other group of physicians in the state. The passage of this legislation alone cost Radiologists across the state of Florida in 1994 an estimated ten million dollars. We can no longer be the only group of physicians that are singled out for such legislative action.

It certainly became evident to us in Florida during the past six years that our specific needs could not be met and protected without our own political involvement and representation in the State Capital. States need to have their input and influence made in the hallways, in the legislative offices and in the workshops before it becomes a bill and before it reaches the floor.

We need to continue to work with the general state medical societies, but we can no longer depend on the state medical societies to look out for our specific interests. They may have competing interests such as when we were faced with the self-referral bill. We must turn to our own state specialty societies for direction, guidance and involvement. If Radiologists across the country don't support their state chapter through membership, dues and involvement, radiology will suffer at the hands of those who seek to destroy our specialty as we know it.

The responsibilities, the expectations and the demands on state chapters have all increased as well as the complexities of the problems. In order to better control our own destiny, we need to increase our visibility and influence in the state political and legislative arena. This requires time, input and money. One single event in the legislature could affect your practice as much as tens of thousands of dollars as evidenced by our 1.5% tax.

We could do nothing and accept what comes our way. Another option would be to learn from the optometrists, podiatrists and chiropractors and become highly unified and involved on the state level. Radiologists should profit from the example of these groups who have made significant gains disproportionate to their members through political action.

The future of our specialty, our continued success, and our ultimate fate will depend on increasing our membership and increasing involvement of our members in our state chapters. If we recognize this, accept the challenge and unite, we will continue to survive and prosper. There is strength and credibility in numbers. My Grandma once said that weak things would become strong if we stuck together.

A few Radiologists over the years have spent many hours working on difficult and complex issues, but we need the help of the entire membership throughout all states on these crucial matters, and we also need to increase our membership. We can anticipate many more difficulties ahead, but we need to channel our frustrations and energies into a constructive and effective direction through our state chapters with our united support. The stakes have never been higher for Radiologists, our patients and the care we deliver. Unity has never been more important. We do have our differences, but they are best settled within the family of Radiology so we can present a united front to the outside.

Your commitment, membership, involvement and dues in the state chapters and in ACR keeps our voice strong in our representation in state and federal legislative issues that impact Radiology. Strong state chapters which are knowledgeable and prepared in the political arena will be a valuable resource on our behalf for the future of Radiology.

Charles D. Williams, M.D., F.A.C.R.  
President-Elect, Florida Radiological Society  
Legislative Chairman, Florida Radiological Society  
ACR Council Steering Committee