

PA lawmakers must act to help doctors provide the medical care people deserve | Opinion

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By Dr. Suzette Song

Here's a quick civics lesson. Each session of Pennsylvania's General Assembly is two years long. It begins in January of an odd-numbered year and ends in November of the subsequent even-numbered year.

January of 2021 marks the third legislative session in which Pennsylvania's patients and physicians have sought to rein in healthcare insurers' excessive preauthorization processes.

Four long years ago, at the start of 2017 – 2018 legislative session, original versions of SB 225 and HB 225 were introduced by Sen. Kristin Phillips-Hill and Representative Steven Mentzer. To ensure that medically necessary care is promptly delivered to patients in need, the Commonwealth's legislature must enact this vital legislation this year.

In orthopaedics and in many other specialties, care delayed due to treatment preauthorization is care denied. In addition, preauthorization requirements for physical therapy prior to orthopaedic surgery can be detrimental to a patient's wellbeing and ultimate recovery. Every day, my physician colleagues and I fight on behalf of our patients to vindicate their right to the proper care an insurer has received premium payments to provide. Fortunately, in most cases, we win the battles to provide medically necessary care, but why must we engage in these daily conflicts?

Physician practices figuratively wage a daily behind the scenes war to ensure patients receive the care they need and for which the insurers were paid. The General Assembly must stop excessive preauthorization processes now.

Excessive preauthorization adds to the cost of care by requiring physician practices to add non-care, administrative staff simply devoted to interfacing with insurers; may diminish patient outcomes by as much as 24% and increase hospitalization by 16% according to a 2019 American Medical Association study; and only lines the pockets of the third-party administrators who have a profit motive to deny care.

HB 225 and SB 225 will stop these practices. To end these adverse outcomes to patients and the healthcare delivery system, the General Assembly must enact this necessary legislation before their summer recess in July.

We are all painfully aware of the legislative disfunction in Washington DC. But here's some news, in the waning days of the 116th Congress and the Trump Administration, long-sought legislation subjecting healthcare insurers to antitrust laws cleared the Congress in bipartisan votes and was signed into law by President Donald Trump on Jan. 13, 2021. This vital law will begin to level the playing field between healthcare providers and insurers. And its enactment following the most contentious election in memory was powered by bipartisan votes.

As a physician advocate who has worked the Halls of Congress and our own State Capitol, I am amazed that the federal government took on the insurance industry, and in a bipartisan manner, enacted significant legislation to benefit patients and physicians. It's time for the 205th Pennsylvania General Assembly to come together and do, as well, for their constituent patients and physicians as the 116th Congress did. Three legislative sessions are far too many to fail to protect constituent patients.

Suzette Song, MD, is Vice President of Medical Affairs for OSS Health, York, PA, and a Board member with the Pennsylvania Orthopaedic Society Board Member

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