

POLICY STATEMENT

Ophthalmic Care of the Medically Underserved

Policy

In spite of federal and state health care initiatives, millions of Americans do not have access to affordable medical and surgical eye care. Appropriate health care should be accessible to everyone without regard to their ability to pay, a concept strongly endorsed by American medicine, the American Academy of Ophthalmology, and its membership. It is the policy of the Academy and the Foundation of the American Academy of Ophthalmology to encourage membership to participate in those initiatives that promote awareness of eye disease and offer access to affordable quality medical and surgical eye care. Through EyeCare America, the Foundation's national public service program, Academy membership has an opportunity to participate in a major, nationally recognized promote-respond and referral system that provides access to care for the medically underserved. In addition, the Academy and the Foundation encourage ophthalmologists to develop local programs that provide care for indigent and medically underserved patients.

Background

Approximately 44 million Americans lack adequate, basic health insurance, and even more lack insurance coverage for and access to routine eye care. Many of these individuals are not indigent; they either do not have access to care or are unable to bear the financial burden imposed by existing health care programs. Federal and state-supported medical care programs vary so widely in their coverage that in some states only the most destitute are eligible for benefits. Furthermore, as health care costs rise, routine medical care is becoming unaffordable for increasing numbers of individuals.

Evaluation of Policy

The Academy should continue to encourage its membership to participate actively in supporting efforts to improve local, state, and federal health care initiatives that increase patient access to and utilization of medical services that reduce the individual's financial burden. The Foundation of the American Academy of Ophthalmology should continue to encourage the Academy membership to participate in any or all of its EyeCare America programs, which include the following:

1. The Seniors EyeCare Program. This is the largest public service program in American medicine, which provides access and needed medical eye care to eligible seniors over 65 with no out-of-pocket expense.
2. The Diabetes EyeCare Program. EyeCare America partners with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and other organizations that provide access to eye care for eligible patients with diabetes.
3. The Glaucoma EyeCare Program., This program promotes early awareness of glaucoma and provides referral and treatment for eligible individuals who are at increased risk of developing glaucoma.
4. The Children's EyeCare Program., This program is in its pilot phase to increase awareness of potentially blinding children's eye diseases.

5. The AMD EyeCare Program. This program promotes annual eye exams for individuals 65 and older, raises awareness of age-related macular degeneration (AMD), provides the latest information about treatment options and low-vision resources, and facilitates access to eye care.

Summary

Rising health care costs are leaving an increasing percentage of the population without access to adequate, affordable medical care. The American Academy of Ophthalmology and its Foundation encourage ophthalmologists to participate in ophthalmology-specific and general medical care programs at the local, state, and national levels that enhance information, access, and the delivery of needed medical and surgical eye care.

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