More than 220 pediatricians and pediatric subspecialists from across the country attended the 2017 AAP Legislative Conference in Washington D.C. to hone advocacy skills and learn more about major child health priorities from policy experts and leaders. Attendees headed to Capitol Hill on the conference’s final day to deliver a clear message to members of Congress on behalf of children: “Extend funding for the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and keep Medicaid strong.”

Thanks in large part to CHIP and Medicaid, over 95 percent of children in the U.S. currently have health insurance, the highest level ever recorded. Despite this success, many of us encounter families seeking emergency care for their children because of difficulty accessing needed health care services and/or medications. We know that social determinants of health—including access to health care and prescription drug coverage—have a tremendous impact on the overall health and life trajectories of the children we serve. It is critical—now more than ever—that we mobilize and speak out to oppose any policies that would limit access to quality, comprehensive, and affordable health care for children (including any efforts to destabilize the Medicaid and CHIP programs).

While so many valuable lessons were imparted during the 2017 AAP Legislative Conference, here are a few key “take aways” for those of us who work on the front lines to address the medical and social needs that patients bring to our doors each day:

- Advocacy is a team sport. Success depends on our coordination, amplification, and mobilization to convince policymakers to factor the unique needs of children into their decision-making.
- Advocacy is needed at all levels: individual, community, state, and federal. Whether in our hospitals, city halls, state houses, or the U.S. Capitol, children’s health needs championing. We all have a critical role to play!
- Our advocacy is essential because children don’t vote or have well-funded political action committees. If we don’t speak up and share the stories of the young patients we serve, their concerns will not be represented to policymakers.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics offers a wealth of resources for all willing to serve as a voice for children! One easy way to stay “in the know” and act on issues affecting child health is to become an AAP Advocacy “Key Contact” (Visit federaladvocacy.aap.org to sign up with just a few clicks and to learn more about the AAP’s federal advocacy priorities.)

In the words of 19th century physician Rudolf Virchow, “Medicine has imperceptibly led us into the social field and placed us in a position of confronting directly the great problems of our time.” As we care for children each day in the ED, we witness firsthand how legislative policies and other social determinants affect the well-being of our patients. We all have a role to play in acting collaboratively as advocates to influence these upstream social factors in a way that will positively influence our patients’ downstream health outcomes!

--Jerri Rose, M.D., F.A.A.P.

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