

Opinion Editorial
Submitted by Jon B. Tucker, MD
President, Pennsylvania Orthopaedic Society

“You are now free to move about the country™”. This popular Southwest Airlines slogan may soon apply to physicians in Pennsylvania if the General Assembly does not pass some type of healthcare reform legislation during the nine scheduled session days in September and October. This is a herculean task given the circumstances, and I am curious to see just exactly what the leaders in Harrisburg decide for the future of physicians in the Commonwealth.

This has been a critical year in the political struggle for healthcare. Much to the detriment of Pennsylvania patients, mere political wrangling has halted passage of two separate measures designed to facilitate access to healthcare. The political impasse over the connection of the Mcare Abatement Program and the health insurance expansion may cost Pennsylvania healthcare providers millions of dollars and dramatically impair efforts to recruit physicians to the state for years to come.

The Mcare Abatement Program has protected our healthcare system from the devastating effects of the medical liability crisis. Enacted in 2003, the program has helped thousands of doctors to continue to treat their patients. Equally as important, the program has allowed Pennsylvania to retain and recruit physicians. In return for the state’s assistance with medical liability costs, physicians agree to practice for one additional year in Pennsylvania. Without Mcare Abatement, it is a real possibility that doctors may consider leaving the Commonwealth to go to states with lower medical liability costs and higher reimbursement.

The Mcare Abatement Program has been invaluable to healthcare providers across the state and there is no doubt that a huge incentive to remain in the Commonwealth will vanish with its expiration. Most physicians have paid their 2008 surcharges and are no longer beholden to their commitment to remain in state. Unless the Mcare Abatement Program is renewed, many doctors in Pennsylvania may be accepting job offers elsewhere. The headhunters are busy, ramping up their efforts to attract disaffected and disillusioned Pennsylvania physicians with lucrative job offers all over the country . This loss of invaluable talent is avoidable, but only if the General Assembly and the Governor act immediately to renew the Mcare Abatement program.