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The leaders of the private medical and hospital sphere are genuinely troubled over the current federal role in health care. Federal health programs already buffeted by budget reductions face even tougher times ahead. Under these circumstances, little progress is likely in resolving the problems faced by millions of uninsured working poor people and other needy individuals not covered by any federal or state program. Government is obviously not alone in paring programs and benefits. Third-party payers are more insistent than ever about financing only those services which their beneficiaries receive. As a consequence, public and university hospitals which have borne the greatest burden of uncompensated care over the last decade are now hurting. But their beleaguered state is not receiving much attention because, in part, other hospitals are reporting robust financial conditions. Many forces have brought about this dilemma, but the responsibility for reporting its consequences rests largely with physicians. By and large, physicians have not spoken out within their own communities, warning the public that there comes a point at which the quality of care will suffer and accessibility to care will wither for people without means. Physicians are still the heart of the health care industry, America’s second largest economic sector, which now provides more than 6 million jobs. Yet, for as long as I can recall, their stance on pressing societal issues has been reactive, rather than proactive. Physicians must recognize that they cannot win any battle fought on economic grounds; though a prestigious profession, they represent only a tiny segment in a nation of 250 million people. While the American Medical Association’s DRG monitoring project, initiated in June 1984, which elicits reactions from physicians on the effect of prospective payment in their hospitals and identifies problem areas that may need further study, is a worthy start on the necessary task of measuring quality, community physicians need to do more. As patients’ advocates, physicians must speak out if quality is deteriorating. If their concerns over quality are valid, I am sure the administration would be prepared to address them.

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