

MEDICARE – HOW IT ALL BEGAN
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This pulmonologist was plying his profession in upstate New York some forty-two years ago, when his receptionist announced the "The White House is calling!" I assumed it was a hoax, since my only direct contact with that eminent residence had been limited to passing through as a tourist. However, said receptionist persisted, and connected me to the caller, who inquired whether I would be available for "The Presidential Meeting on Medicare Implementation", to take place on June 15, 1966.

The invitation, which was shortly confirmed by a telegram, was not to be declined. I was more than a bit surprised to be selected, since I had been active in medical politics*, supporting the AMA's campaigns to stave off the inroads of government into our medical domains, decrying and demonizing "socialized medicine". However, Lyndon Baines Johnson had triumphed overwhelmingly in the election of 1964, carrying 48 of the 50 states, and carrying with him substantial Democratic majorities in both houses. LBJ, the consummate politician, was able to advance his "Great Society" programs, winning passage of civil rights, anti-poverty, aid to education, and of most importance to us physicians and our patients, Medicare and Medicaid.

The president's advisors and staff had been diligently preparing for this great event for some years, awaiting passage of the appropriate legislation, signed into law just a year before.

There were two hundred participants, from all fifty states. We were picked up at our hotel by buses, which took us directly to the White House, thence into the East Room, which somehow managed to squeeze in enough chairs for all of us. Meeting was chaired by John W. Gardner, Secretary of Health, Education & Welfare. TV cameras were ready in the rear.

The President was announced, who then gave a moving, half hour address, including " -- for the first time in the history of America, every senior citizen will be able to receive hospital care -- not as a ward of the State, not as a charity case, but as an insured patient." The President also noted that some twenty per cent of the nation's hospitals were not in compliance with the Civil Rights Act. "We believe that the answer to that problem is a simple one. Congress has given it in the law itself. We ask every citizen to obey that." He concluded with "Thank you so much for coming."

Following the President's address, still in the East Room, Social Security Administrator Robert M. Ball & Surgeon General William H. Stewart, M.D., each gave a presentation on the Present Status of Medicare.

The group was then transported to the Hilton Hotel, where we all split up into twelve discussion groups. Luncheons were served in our meeting rooms. Robert Ball was Co-Chairman of my group. Each participant was provided with a very extensive set of documents, well organized in 3-ring binders. It included the 31 page Medicare Handbook for Beneficiaries (116 pages in 2008) and a Reference Guide for Physicians. Also included was a reprint (JAMA 13 Jun 66) of the Surgeon General Report on Civil Rights and Medicare. Hospitals were put on notice that Medicare reimbursement would be contingent on their compliance with the Civil Rights Act.

This also required that all hospital medical staff privileges be non-discriminatory, i.e., " -- without regard to the applicant's race, color or national origin."

Discussion was lively and focused. I have retained 4 pages of notes from my sessions.

Following our group sessions, we all reassembled in the hotel ballroom, for a summary meeting with John Gardner, Secretary HEW and Wilbur Cohen, Under Secretary HEW.

We then returned home, to our patients and to our hospitals, overloaded with information on this momentous legislation, which would change health care in America irrevocably. My responsibility: to carry the information to my colleagues, to my hospitals, to my patients and to the public, about how best to implement Medicare and Medicaid.

*AMA - Member House of Delegates from Medical Society of State of New York (MSSNY)

National Speakers Bureau

Member American Medical Political Action Committee (AMPAC)

Medical Society of State of New York (MSSNY)

Member, House of Delegates

Member Council on Legislation

Empire State Political Action Committee (EMPAC)

Founding member, state Chairman 2 years