



# Friends in High Places

By Michael F. Conlan

Community pharmacy is justifiably optimistic about its future in the health care reform puzzle with President Obama's selection of Tom Daschle as his secretary of Health & Human Service and as director of a newly established White House Office of Health Reform. From his election to the House in 1978 to the Senate in 1986 (including a stint as Democratic Majority Leader in 2001-03), Daschle, 61, has been a tireless supporter of community pharmacy.

He knows our issues well from many meetings with NCPA in Washington and importantly from dropping in on independent community pharmacies in his home state of South Dakota. In 2001, NCPA honored Daschle with the Legislative Defense Fund's Equal Access Advocate Award and presented it to him at a pharmacy owned by NCPA member Anne Nopens in Lake Preston, S.D. The award recognizes his leadership and support "for payment to independent pharmacist professional services, for equal access for independent pharmacists to fair pricing, and equal access for Medicare beneficiaries to the pharmacy of their choice." Those provisions were part of legislation Daschle introduced to establish a Medicare drug benefit that also allowed pharmacists to negotiate the terms of Medicare contracts. Of course, the Medicare bill that became law in 2003 and established Part D, over our strong objections, contained none of those provisions.

Daschle also was intimately involved in the legislative efforts behind the Clinton health reform plan in 1993-94. The plan and particularly the secretive way it was crafted are now widely derided and held up as a model of what not to do. But let's not lose sight what the Health Security Act would have meant for pharmacists:

- Medicare reimbursement set at the lower of the 90th percentile of actual charges or estimated acquisition cost plus a \$5 dispensing fee indexed annually to the Consumer Price Index.

- Pharmaceutical manufacturers required to provide equal access to price discounts to all purchasers in the marketplace.
- The insurance industry's antitrust exemption as it applies to the health care industry repealed.
- Health care providers permitted to collectively negotiate terms of participation, including payment for product dispensing and professional pharmacy services.

Not too shabby, eh? Now what's past is prologue as Shakespeare said, but there's no guarantee Daschle or Obama can include those provisions and deliver on their promises to ensure that all Americans get health care coverage, improve the quality of care, and rein in health care costs. But we have been and will continue to make them aware of the great potential that community pharmacists have to help them meet their goals. It's also important to note that as senator, Obama cosponsored our Medicare prompt payment and Medicaid AMP fix legislative priorities and voted to override the veto that put prompt pay and a delay in the AMP cuts into law last summer.

While it's great to have friends in high places, it's at ground level—the grassroots—where real change begins. Please visit [www.ncpanet.org](http://www.ncpanet.org) to see how you can help make it happen. **ap**

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