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Primary Care Reforms Are Urged

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WASHINGTON – Primary care – the basic medical care that people get when they visit their doctors for routine physicals and minor problems – could fall apart in the U.S. without immediate reforms, the American College of Physicians said.

“Primary care is on the verge of collapse,” said the organization, a professional group which certifies internists, in a statement. “Very few young physicians are going into primary care and those already in practice are under such stress that they are looking for an exit strategy.”

Dropping incomes coupled with difficulties in juggling patients, soaring bills and policies from insurers that encourage rushed office visits all mean that more primary care doctors are retiring than are graduating from medical school, the ACP said in its report.

The group has proposed a solution – calling on federal policy makers to approve new ways of paying doctors that would put primary care doctors in charge of organizing a patient’s care and giving patients more responsibility for monitoring their own health and scheduling regular visits.

U.S. doctors have long complained that reimbursement policies of both Medicare and private insurers reward a “just-in-time” approach, instead of preventive care that would save money and keep patients healthier.

“Medicare will pay tens of thousands of dollars...for a limb amputation on a diabetic patient, but virtually nothing to the primary care physician for keeping the patient’s diabetes under control,” said Bob Doherty, senior vice president for the ACP.

The ACP plan called for innovations such as using e-mail to consult on minor and routine matters, freeing up expensive office visit time for when it is needed. Doctors would be compensated for an e-mail consultation.

The proposals include incentives for doctors to work more efficiently and to provide better care, ACP President Dr. C. Anderson Hedberg told a news conference. “ACP proposals would provide patients with access to care that is coordinated by their own personal physician,” Dr. Hedberg said.

The ACP cited an American Medical Association survey that found 35% of all physicians nationwide are more than 55 years old and will soon retire.