

Office Visit: 'Tis the Season for Surgery

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Across the United States, surgeons are gearing up for one of the busiest seasons of the year: the holidays. Not because we see an increase in football injuries (we might) or because hard-working homeowners shoveling ice from sidewalks start taking spills (another possibility), but because by the end of the year, many Americans have met their insurance deductibles. And so surgery season begins in full swing.

This is how it works most of the time: After months of medical visits, a patient has finally reached their out-of-pocket limit, meaning the insurance company will now cover medical procedures if done by the end of the same calendar year. Once the calendar page flips to January, deductibles are reset and a patient must meet it again before the insurance company will pay for procedures.

So November and December become prime times for patients to have that knee, hip or other elective surgery they have been putting off until their deductible was met. As doctors, we wonder what health care reform will mean to our patients who rely on these end-of-year incentives to pay for needed care. As surgeons, we hope that our leaders can find a system that encourages surgery when it is needed, rather than making patients wait unnecessary weeks or months to cover medically-necessary operations.

Our industry is fraught with challenges, many of which I have covered in prior columns, and our legislators are finally talking seriously about solving them, but we still have far to go. So little is understood about what health reform will do to the common person – the patient my colleagues and I treat every day – and while political talk show hosts, our local representatives and even medical practitioners try to sort it out, many patients are left scared and confused about their future.

While we do not yet know the outcome of much of the current legislation, we are committed as a medical community to providing care, comfort and compassion to those we serve. That will not change. What may change is the way we are able to offer that care.

As our Congress and president work through the specifics of health reform legislation, we as medical providers have a duty to send our concerns to Washington. Before we put our heads down and get to the work of our busiest season, I urge us all to take a scalpel to the health care system while the debate remains open. It's not only good medicine to advocate for our patients, it's good business.

Dr. David Holden is a board-certified orthopedic surgeon and currently serves on the board of directors with McBride Clinic Inc. in Oklahoma City.