

# **Support for National Health Insurance among American Physicians: Five Years Later**

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**Background:** Concerns about rising health care costs and medical care access have been at the forefront of Americans' minds for some time.(1) The most recent census data revealed that the number of uninsured Americans has jumped by 2.2 million to 47 million. This rise in the number of people without health insurance is the biggest jump reported by the Census Bureau since 1992.(2) In 2002, we conducted a survey of physicians and found that 49% of them supported governmental legislation to establish National Health Insurance (NHI).(3) Obviously, many factors, both political and secular, can influence beliefs about health care financing reform. Five years later we sought to determine if physician opinion had changed.

**Objective:** To determine: (1) Do physicians support or oppose governmental legislation to establish NHI, and (2) do physicians support or oppose achieving universal coverage through more incremental reform?

**Design/Methods:** We randomly sampled 5,000 physicians from the AMA masterfile. Both this and our 2002 survey were designed to represent the total population of United States physicians. Using an identical question from our 2002 study, we asked physicians to express support or opposition for governmental legislation to establish NHI, using a 5-point Likert scale. We then asked for support or opposition for achieving universal coverage through incremental reform. We also gathered data on physician membership organizations, demographics, and personal and practice characteristics.

**Results:** Of 5,000 mailed surveys, 509 were undeliverable and returned to us, and 197 were returned by physicians who reported that they were not practicing. We received 2,193 surveys from the 4,294 eligible participants, for a response rate of 51%. Respondents did not differ significantly from non-respondents with respect to sex, age, doctoral degree type, or specialty as defined by the AMA Masterfile.

This survey found that 59% of physicians now support legislation to establish national health insurance (28% “strongly support,” 31% “generally support”), and only 32% now oppose it (17% “strongly oppose,” 15% “generally oppose”). This is a significant change from what we found five years ago, when 49% supported such legislation, and 40% opposed it. With the exception of pediatric subspecialists, who were highly supportive in both 2002 and 2007, support for legislation to establish National Health Insurance increased in every single measured specialty. (*Figure 1*) With the exception of surgical subspecialists, anesthesiologists, and radiologists, a majority of the members of every medical specialty now support the formation of National Health Insurance.

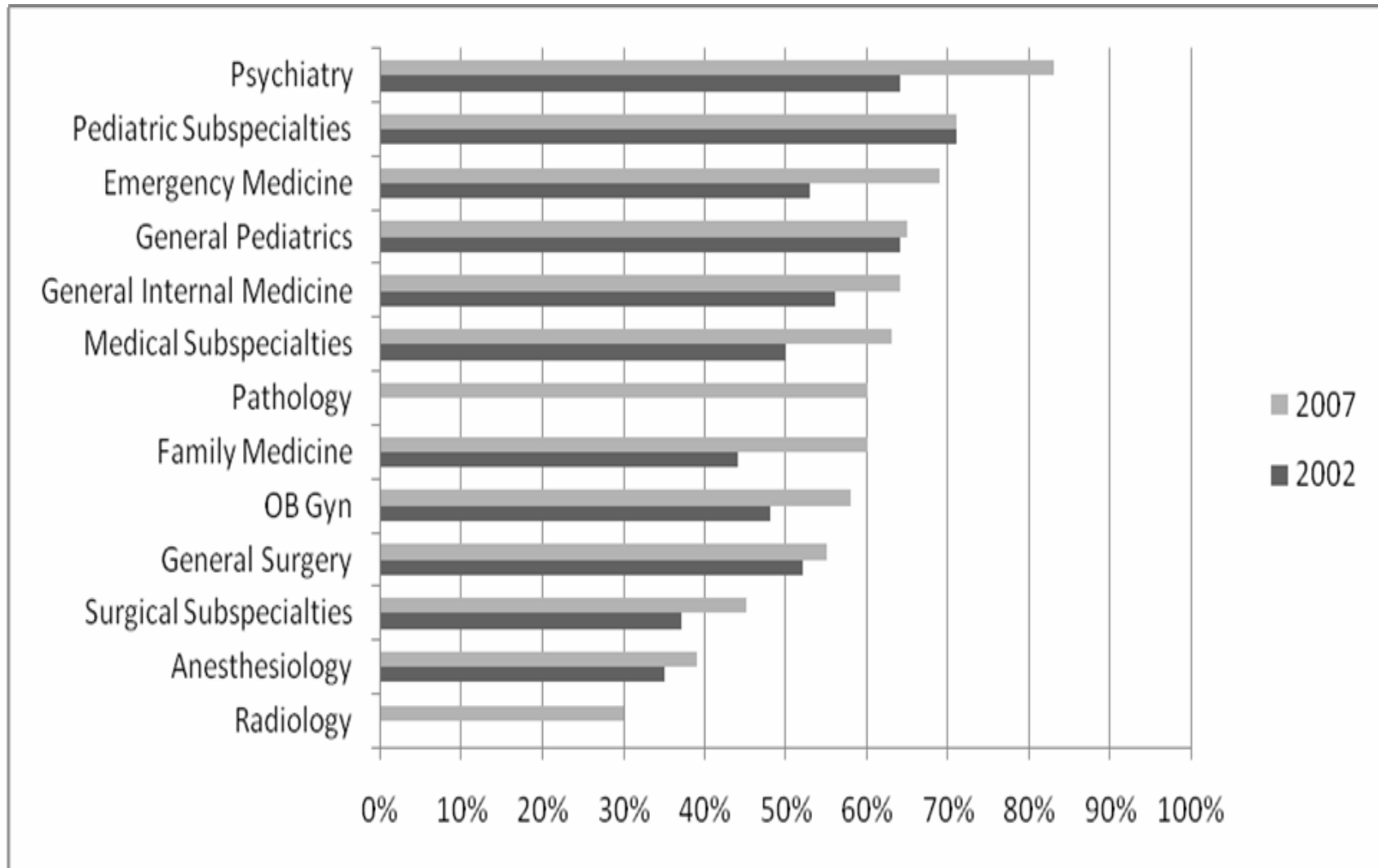
In general, fewer respondents (55%) were in support of achieving universal coverage through more incremental reform (14% “strongly support,” 41% “generally support”). More respondents were neutral (21%), so fewer physicians opposed incremental reform (25%) as well (14% “strongly oppose,” 10% “generally oppose”). However, only 43% of those who were opposed to government support for National Health Insurance were also in support of working towards universal coverage through more incremental reforms. Thus, only 14% (32% x 43%) of physicians overall are opposed to National Health Insurance but support more incremental reforms to achieve universal coverage.

**Conclusions:** In 2007, almost 60% of physicians supported government legislation to establish National Health Insurance – a 10% increase in support since 2002. This increase represents over 80,000 physicians, distributed across almost every medical specialty, who have changed their minds in support of National Health Insurance over the past five years. The largest increase was seen among physicians who “strongly support” National Health Insurance; now almost twice as many physicians support it as oppose it. This study, involving over 2000 physicians nationwide, is the largest study done to date of physician views on healthcare financing reform. Today, a significant majority of physicians support government legislation to establish National Health Insurance.

## REFERENES

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2. US Census Bureau. Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2006. 2007.
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Figure 1: Support government legislation to establish National Health Insurance in 2007 and 2002 by specialty.\*



\*2002 data are not available for Pathology and Radiology, where we did not have enough of a response to report that value.