

Optimism

■ Lou Ellen Horwitz, MA

The annual Urgent Care Convention is always my prime time for taking the pulse of the field. I hope you were among those able to join us in Dallas last month! There's just no substitute for in-person conversations and observations.

What I expected to hear is not what I heard. There are a lot of reasons to be pessimistic right now; some of them are new and some are the same challenges we've been working through for some time. Reimbursement remains pretty stagnant, staffing is still a challenge, visits have been flat in some parts of the country, supply costs continue to rise, and there's uncertainty in the markets. All of this should have added up to a dismal mood among both participants and exhibitors, but that's the opposite of what we experienced.

The mood of the crowd in Dallas was absolutely magnetic. People were excited to talk to each other, there was plenty of laughter, class sessions were standing room only, and the dance floor at the Foundation Celebration was thumping as usual! I've written many times about the resilience of Urgent Care people and our creativity in solving problems. Even with all of the headwinds, we seem to be "Driving Change" as much as ever.

What that change looks like, however, continues to evolve across the field. Some folks are doubling down on acuity, others are doubling down on door-to-door time (hard to do both), some are focusing on downstream impacts, and some are amping up ancillary services. One thing we've all learned during this evolution: Success requires an "all-in" approach.

You can't ultimately be successful by just dipping your toe into any of these approaches. They compete with each other through workflows, hiring and training strategies, equipment investments, contract negotiations, and external relationships. Picking an approach and betting on it fully is the name of the game right now. The good news is

that from what I heard at the Convention, any and all of these approaches can be successful if done well.

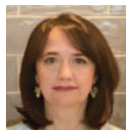
Urgent Care is resilient and creative. While many others have gone all-in on assorted on-demand or patient-centric opportunities, they aren't doing it with the longitudinal expertise all of you have in the on-demand healthcare space. You make it look easier than it actually is, which leads to a lot of hubris on the part of new entrants. It's no wonder they are struggling to disrupt us.

On the advocacy front, things are moving well. We've had good meetings with the new leaders at Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and are guardedly optimistic about getting something into the 2026 Medicare Physician Fee Schedule (MPFS) that's positive for Urgent Care. With anticipated annual changes to the MPFS and the timing of brand new political appointees potentially resetting the priorities, it will be a small miracle if we can get our wish, but we remain hopeful. We will know this summer. If we miss the window for 2026, we have a plan, but we'd much prefer to get a quick victory and move on to commercial payer advocacy!

Summer is typically a quieter time in Urgent Care, which makes it the perfect time for staff hiring, training, and re-training to gear up for fall. For that, we have a new gift for you that is *absolutely free* until next summer.

Thanks to an ongoing grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to the Urgent Care Foundation, we are pleased to provide a brand new podcast on antibiotic stewardship that offers unique perspectives on this familiar topic. We've partnered with Hippo Education, which is widely known for their fun podcasts, to put together a program expressly for Urgent Care that focuses more on how to interact with patients (and their parents) regarding appropriate antibiotic use so that you can get over the humps that stand in the way of implementing the medicine that you know is best.

It's 5 hours of content and is available *for free* for a limited time. You can learn about it on the UCA website (urgentcareassociation.org) or on the Hippo Education website (hippoed.com) and get free access for yourself or your clinicians by contacting Hippo. We are really excited about how this will make your job easier! ■



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