
Defense Report

AUSA



Special Pay for Military Doctors— There is too Much Uncertainty

In the realm of military affairs it is difficult to find a subject on which there is general agreement. One man's super-weapon is another's budget-buster—and so it goes. The rarity that proves this rule is the broad acceptance of the fact that military health care is at the crisis point and about to fall off the cliff into a calamity.

The focal point of the crisis is the shortage of physicians. Military hospitals are turning away retired personnel and their dependents, finding it more difficult to serve the families of active duty service members and, in some cases even finding it difficult to perform their basic job—taking care of soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen.

The inability of the military services to recruit enough physicians is a very complex matter but one of the factors working against recruitment is temporizing on the part of Congress and the Defense Department. The tendency has been to take short term solutions rather than look at what must be done to solve the problem once and for all.

Establishment of the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences was a step in the right direction but even when it reaches its full production of about 100 career military physicians each year it will not be enough. And even the university has come under attack from the Carter Administration, surviving a total Budget cut through the good graces of the House Armed Services Committee.

Another example of the lack of coordinated action toward a solution was the decision by the Internal Revenue Service that income derived in the form of Armed Forces Medical Scholarships would be taxable. Interest in the scholarships, which carry a follow-on service obligation, has been considerably diminished by the ruling.

Studies to determine the reason for the doctor shortage have been going on for years and they have all come up with essentially the same answer: "A doctor can make more money in civilian practice without having to put up with the negative aspects of a military career."

Unfortunately the House Armed Services Committee has just temporized again by approving legislation for a one-year extension of special pay for military physicians while the problem is "studied" some more.

Studying won't change the solution. The attraction of a military medical career must be based on permanent incentives, immune from the red pencils of budget cutters and the whim of a few anti-military congressmen.