dispensed out of the box. This has led not only to encroachment, but misuse of codes, and CMS’ subsequent misapprehension that the reimbursement is far too high for an off-the-shelf item and a one-visit episode of care.

“Orthotics and prosthetics have become commoditized,” he explains. “We see a patient over an episode of care for multiple visits, but the only encounter that the payers recognize is the encounter where a device is delivered. And all they pay us for is that device during that encounter.”

The numbers are weighted heavily—and not in our favor, says Hall, when it comes to competing for state licensure and scope of practice with other allied health professions. “In 2016 there were 239,800 physical therapists (PTs) in the country, and in 2017 there were 5,917 certified prosthetist/orthotists in the country. There’s no question who has more clout—and gets more attention.”

And although more licensure is progressing, “It’s been a long haul to get as many licensure states as we have,” Hall observes. “States like North Dakota will probably never be licensed because there are so few certified individuals. The cost to them would be astronomical.”

McGill, however, excludes encroachment from the list of trends that still merit concern. “I won’t pretend it doesn’t exist,” he says, “but the profession’s concerns versus the objective reality aren’t in sync. For example, the data does not bear out the claim that PTs are engaged in any material way in custom orthotic or prosthetic care. While there are instances cited of this kind of activity by some O&Ps, the data suggests it is the exception, not the rule, and I don’t think it’s ultimately a key threat to O&P long-term.”

While some O&P practices are now physician-owned, McGill notes that this is not classic encroachment because the physicians are not actually providing the O&P care themselves and displacing O&P professionals: rather, they are hiring licensed or certified prosthetists and orthotists to deliver the care in the facilities that they own. O&P EDGE

(Opposite issue, we’ll apply 2019 perspectives as we revisit experts’ 2009 concerns and expectations regarding the evolution of patient care and the economics of outcomes, as well as legislative and educational progress that advances the O&P profession.)

Judith Philipps Otto is a freelance writer who has assisted with marketing and public relations for various clients in the O&P profession. She has been a newspaper writer and editor and has won national and international awards as a broadcast writer-producer.

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