

## Independent doctors get a new advocacy group as skepticism of health giants grows

IndeMed launches with a focus on payment policy, fighting consolidation

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WASHINGTON — A new health care advocacy group, which will represent the shrinking number of independent doctors in America, is launching Wednesday with an ambitious policy agenda.

IndeMed, which expects to represent nearly 70,000 members at its launch, will take on a host of issues important to doctors wanting to resist the wave of consolidation in recent years, its leaders told STAT. The group's agenda includes reducing the burden of prior authorization, promoting transparent and fair reimbursement from payers, encouraging new practice models, fighting consolidation, and reforming the No Surprises Act.

The group, through its nonprofit and associated political action committee, will push for changes in Washington as well as in states, and plans to offer members a state-by-state advocacy playbook.

"We need a public-facing, patient-facing communication that helps corporations and patients understand the importance of independent medicine," Adam Bruggeman, chairman of the new group and a spine surgeon in Texas, said. "I think we are at a point where if we don't fight for this, you will hit a tipping point where there is no going back."

The share of doctors who are employed by health systems or insurers has jumped over the last decade — now nearing half of all doctors, according to data from the Government Accountability Office. The shift comes amid revenue challenges for some doctors and as private equity, hospitals, and insurance groups see an opportunity in consolidation.

IndeMed looks to take advantage of growing skepticism across the political spectrum of health insurers and provider conglomerates. In recent years, consolidation in the sector has coincided with higher prices, questionable research, and changes to how doctors practice medicine. Those issues have become bipartisan concerns, with lawmakers pointing to research suggesting larger conglomerates increase prices and, at times, lower the quality of care.

Republicans have openly disparaged large insurance companies they once championed. And health care affordability messaging has resonated with voters, intensifying elected officials' interest in new policy solutions. Health industry giants have

found it difficult to adapt to Trump's Washington — especially with health secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. leading HHS and Congress slashing government health care spending.

The group's primary focus is protecting the dispute process in the No Surprises Act, a law meant to protect patients from high out-of-network charges while getting care at an in-network facility.

IndeMed hopes to push Congress and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to ensure higher, more timely reimbursements for providers and enhanced protections for patients under the law.

"Something is not quite right in this process, and we need to clean that up," Bruggeman said. "We are here today with fewer independent physicians because of the decisions that previous administrations and previous Congresses made, and so we really need Congress to step in and act."

Providers have long argued that the implementation of the law has been unfair, expensive, and unwieldy, setting off court battles with payers and the government.

Bruggeman said IndeMed will push for the process to get new "teeth" for when insurers don't pay providers the money they're supposed to under the Independent Dispute Resolution process, used to determine reimbursement for care covered by the No Surprises Act.

Other timely changes in Washington could also line up with IndeMed's agenda: Bruggeman said he believes the Affordable Care Act needs reforms to reduce consolidation amid Republican conversations about how they might change the Obama-era law.

Still, the group enters Washington as a relatively small player, at least by measure of budget: Bruggeman said IndeMed aims to raise \$250,000 per election cycle through the PAC, far less than the millions spent by other advocacy groups in the sector, such as the PAC associated with the American Medical Association, which spent more than \$2.5 million in the 2024 election cycle, according to Open Secrets. (IndeMed will be funded by membership fees and isn't taking funding from outside groups, Bruggeman said.)

Even so, the group could find a ready audience on the Hill and in the administration. And Bruggeman said physicians have been excited by the group.

"The response has been strong," he said. "Everybody's looking for something new — some new aspect to fight and some new direction we can go in to help with this concept of independent medicine."