

Editorial

Greg Wise, Editor, *FOCUS*

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Perhaps the two most significant news items this recent quarter have been the Ebola epidemic reaching the United States and the fall election victories for the Republican party. Although the two are not related, there may be similarities in context.

The Ebola 'crisis' was the consuming topic of the news with fear-mongering and hyperbole dominating the media in its continuing attempt to capture market share and ratings. As physicians, we were well aware of how unlikely a true epidemic would develop in the United States. Despite pleas for reason and restraint by Dr. Anthony Fauci, infectious disease chief at NIH, the public was far too consumed by the irrational fear of wide-scale infection while public officials often overreacted in attempts to impose overly restrictive quarantines and other measures that would actually discourage healthcare workers from assisting in fighting the epidemic in Africa. Reminiscent of the never-ending, mindless (although occasionally entertaining) speculation that the media coverage gave the missing Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, the attention devoted to Ebola undoubtedly disrupted our attention from far more pressing and real challenges to our healthcare system. Nevertheless, consensus has finally emerged and mistakes at certain facilities have turned into initiatives that encourage rationality, standardized education and training with the return of the preeminence of science over speculation. Now the lame-duck congress takes up the debate over the proposed \$6 billion to address the source of the epidemic in East Africa.

What are the implications of the Republican victories in the House, Senate and gubernatorial races in November? In short, who knows? This fall's campaign seemed to be a vote against the president and his policies but there's little consensus what the Republican major initiative would be other than trying to repeal Obamacare. Challenges to a coherent platform are legion. The President still has considerable veto power. The 'tea party' element remains strong and will argue against compromise. Without an expressed Republican reform agenda and clear workable alternatives, there appears to be no healthcare policy mandate. And perhaps most significantly, after 2015 (and possibly before), the paralyzing polarizing politics of the upcoming 2016 election will probably overwhelm any significant bipartisan legislation that can be signed by the president.

So perhaps like Ebola, the country's healthcare policies will likely remain fragmented and subject to the inevitable 15 second sound bites and talking heads' speculations, rather than real progress. As we seek a workable Ebola vaccine, we seem to have already politically immunized ourselves from common sense and bipartisan compromise.