

Sustaining Optimism Together: An Interview with AMGA's Dr. Jerry Penso



On October 6, Jerry Penso, M.D., M.B.A., was appointed AMGA president and chief executive officer. Dr. Penso had been serving as the association's chief medical and quality officer and president of AMGA Foundation. Prior to joining AMGA, Dr. Penso served as medical director, continuum of care, for Sharp Rees-Stealy Medical Group (SRSMG), the largest integrated healthcare delivery system in San Diego. During his tenure, SRSMG was recognized as a top performer in California's Pay for Performance Program for five consecutive years with outstanding results in clinical quality, patient experience, and use of information technology. SRSMG is a 2007 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award recipient and 2010 Acclaim Award Honoree. *Group Practice Journal* interviewed Dr. Penso about his new role and his vision for AMGA.

GPJ: After 35 years of Dr. Donald Fisher at the helm of AMGA, there will certainly be changes ahead. What will be your initial priorities?

Penso: It is important for me to acknowledge the tremendous contributions Dr. Donald Fisher made to AMGA and to American medicine. His vision was for the coordinated care model to be recognized as the ideal system for healthcare delivery. At almost every event, we would hear him say, "The delivery system matters." AMGA has a prominent national presence

because of our influential advocacy and impactful quality and educational programs that will continue as we expand on Don's vision.

The answers to what will change will come from listening and learning—an approach that is at the core of my philosophy. In the coming months, I will be visiting many AMGA members and I will hold virtual town hall meetings so members can discuss their top issues, ask me questions, and communicate their concerns.

We will retain what has worked well to get us to this point—450 member groups serving 1 in 3 Americans—and we will continue to both streamline and add, reevaluating current offerings and selecting those most critical to our members. And yes, there will be innovation and changes based on what I hear from my upcoming member visits and town halls.

GPJ: What are your long-term goals for AMGA?

Penso: I want to make sure that AMGA remains relevant—AMGA must be the resource that members rely on to make the transition to value-based and high-performance healthcare models. We want to be the place where medical groups and health systems find solutions to their critical problems, and gain expertise to improve business operations and patient care. We want members

to use our benefits and to be able to say:

- “I go to AMGA to get answers to pressing problems”
- “AMGA is an indispensable partner that helps to enable my organization’s success”

We must be adaptable in our approach, resolute in our convictions, and engaging and service-oriented in our culture in order to truly support our members.

GPJ: Healthcare policy remains in flux, with a lot of uncertainty involving MACRA and risk payments. What messages will you be taking to Capitol Hill and the administration?

Penso: The uncertainty in healthcare policy is definitely a challenge for AMGA and our members. It makes long-term planning and decision-making difficult; especially since many AMGA members operate on very thin margins. AMGA will continue to advance our value agenda, advocating for changes in both federal policy and commercial health plan activities that promote the move to value and high performance. In order to be successful in risk and effectively manage a population, AMGA members require full claims data that is timely, accurate, and standardized. We need a quality measurement system that is meaningful to physicians and patients. In addition, we need simplification or exemptions from onerous regulations that impair the ability to provide high-value, quality care.

GPJ: A little less than half of AMGA members participate in AMGA quality improvement programs, which have been extremely successful, impacting care for more than 26 million Americans. What ideas do you have to expand and engage more members?

Penso: We are focused on getting more members involved to continue to improve patient results on an even larger scale. This year, the AMGA board of directors created a Quality Committee. One of the committee’s first tasks was to develop approaches that encourage AMGA members to get involved in AMGA quality improvement programs. Their research included member interviews and surveys of those participating in:

- Measure Up/Pressure Down®
- Together 2 Goal®
- Best Practices Learning Collaboratives
- Acclaim Award

Many who have participated in national offerings have seen their quality scores skyrocket and have received local or national recognition for their performance.

AMGA’s quality programs have helped more than 26 million patients in just the past four years. Imagine how many more patients would benefit if we increased members’ involvement. Those who have decided not to participate cited the lack of time, expertise, infrastructure, or simply awareness of the benefits of these initiatives. Based on these findings, we are developing new tactics, like “virtual roundtables” on hot topics, that will expand and engage more of the membership.

GPJ: You previously served as medical director, continuum of care, for Sharp Rees-Stealy Medical Group. How did your experience there prepare you to lead AMGA?

Penso: Having been a practicing primary care physician for 20 years, I feel a strong connection to our members, and a deep empathy for their challenges and concerns. I feel a strong passion for helping our administrative and physician leaders, as I have been in their shoes, and today’s world is even more complex and challenging.

From my time at Sharp, I know in detail the challenges of leading and sustaining change. There are the technical challenges of office workflow, information technology, budgeting, and alignment of incentives, contracting, care management, and communication. And there are also the more vexing cultural issues surrounding change—inspiring and engaging physicians, care teams, and patients to do things differently. I plan to use my experience in medical group leadership to help me better relate to the issues AMGA medical groups and health system leaders are facing and work with the AMGA community to find the right solutions.

GPJ: AMGA members represent a number of different practice models—independent groups, integrated systems, etc. What will AMGA do to meet the needs of different member types?

Penso: Healthcare delivery is undergoing dramatic changes that require AMGA to be nimble. Mergers, acquisitions, and new players are changing the very nature of our membership. Members will have diverse needs as payment models and the legislative and regulatory environment evolve. Some multispecialty medical groups and physician-led organizations will become part of larger systems of care with diverse and potentially conflicting agendas.

Although we do have diversity in our practice models, I am confident there is a unity around our common purpose—empowering the delivery of coordinated,

physician-directed, patient-centered, high-quality, value-driven health care. Together we can advocate for payment models that promote better care and accountability, create strong peer-to-peer sharing of operational and clinical expertise, and foster innovation in care delivery that will improve care and the physician and patient experience.

GPJ: What professional accomplishments are you most proud of in your career?

Penso: Five years ago, we launched AMGA's first national quality campaign on hypertension, Measure Up/Pressure Down®, and were able to improve hypertension care for more than 540,000 people. This was AMGA's first foray into the national quality arena. By the end of the campaign, we mobilized over 150 medical groups and health systems. We led this by partnering with prominent nonprofits like the American Heart Association, developing and implementing a measurement system to track our progress, and publishing a framework and toolkit that engaged physicians and their patients. This campaign taught me the incredible power we can harness by uniting AMGA members around a common purpose.

GPJ: What are the biggest challenges of your new role? And what are you most looking forward to?

Penso: First is maintaining strategic focus. Like many of our members, we face many competing priorities. In order to be successful, AMGA must be deliberate in the issues we promote, the legislation and regulations we address, and the services we provide. Second, we must continue to develop strong relationships with AMGA leaders. I look forward to meeting the administrative and physician leaders from around the country and hearing firsthand what our members need. Third is sustaining optimism. I am most looking forward to being in this role because it supports my personal passion to improve health for millions more Americans.

My years at AMGA have strengthened my conviction that we can help to lead meaningful improvements in healthcare delivery and improve the lives of patients nationwide.

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