Current state of U.S. health-care law to be explored at ABA's conference
By Amanda Robert, Law Bulletin staff writer
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Health care has become the most highly regulated industry, and just when lawyers think it can't get more regulated — it gets more regulated, said Sidney S. Welch, a partner in the health-care practice at Arnall, Golden, Gregory LLP in Atlanta.

"With health-care reform, there are a lot of changes with respect to how various service providers within health care are going to operate due to a governmental push to integrate providers to bring down costs," she said.

Welch and other health-care lawyers from around the country will travel to Chicago this week to attend the American Bar Association Health Law Section's Physician-Legal Issues Conference. The 12th annual conference will be Thursday and Friday at Loyola University Chicago School of Law.

As chairwoman of the conference planning committee, Welch encouraged lawyers who want information on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), the legislation that introduced national health-care reform and how the reform affects physicians and their practices, to attend.

"The purpose [of the Physician-Legal Issues Conference] is to bring legal issues that are cutting-edge and of interest to both physicians and their lawyers," she said.

John D. Blum, the John J. Waldron research professor at Loyola's law school, who is an active member of the ABA Health Law Section, agreed that the conference demonstrates the importance and uniqueness of focusing on health law issues.

This year, its overriding theme is to examine and evaluate the implications of health-care reform on the medical practice, Blum said.

"As more and more regulations are coming out, and as we have a better notion of how the law is unfolding, I think there are a lot of questions that need to be addressed about what does that do vis-à-vis the individual doctor or doctors," he said.

Cecil B. Wilson, president of the American Medical Association, will open the conference with a discussion on the PPACA and options it provides to physicians and their lawyers.

"It'll look at, what are the practice choices for physicians today," Welch said. "Should they practice by themselves? In a large group? As an employee of the hospital?"

Welch said other interesting Thursday sessions include a luncheon address by Lewis Morris, chief counsel to the office of the inspector general in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, who
will discuss his office's current and future initiatives, and a panel discussion that will explore how physicians and their lawyers can structure relationships with specialty centers and hospitals.

Welch suggested that lawyers also attend two other sessions on Friday, an early morning panel on changing definitions of quality in health care and a midmorning panel on the use of technology like telemedicine and social media in physician practices.

Blum joined Loyola's law school in 1987, around the time it developed its health-law program. The school wanted to host the conference because of its long-term interest in working with lawyers on challenges they face when representing health-care clients, he said.

"It gives them a current sense of what the status of the law is, not just on its face, but in lieu of regulations and how different lawyers around the country are counseling physicians about what those physicians need to do in terms of compliance," Blum said.

Lawyers interested in attending the Physician-Legal Issues Conference can find the full list of programs and speakers at the ABA online.