

EDITORIAL

Strength in Number Crunchers

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Every once in a while, an idea comes along that's so breathtakingly sensible it immediately demands support. Such is the case of a proposal from five professional associations that represent actuaries, which say the chief number crunchers hired by the federal government to crunch numbers should actually be bona fide number crunchers.

It was less than a year ago that government investigators confirmed that the head of Medicare at the time had threatened to fire the agency's chief actuary, Richard Foster, if Mr. Foster shared information with Congress on the costs of the Medicare prescription drug benefit. The Bush administration had arm-twisted votes out of lawmakers by saying the cost would not exceed \$400 billion over 10 years, but Mr. Foster's estimate showed that the cost would be \$500 billion to \$600 billion. That information was suppressed, the drug benefit was passed, and the administration now acknowledges that the cost will be in the range of Mr. Foster's estimates. But no one has been punished.

Mr. Foster fought back and, by staying in his post rather than resigning in protest, prevented the administration from replacing him, possibly with someone who is not even an actuary. A loophole in the law lets non-actuaries serve as chief actuaries at Medicare, Social Security and other agencies. So the American Academy of Actuaries and four other actuaries' organizations have sent a letter to Congress asking for a law requiring that the government's chief actuaries be actuaries in good standing with the academy. We endorse this wholeheartedly.

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