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July 11, 2011

The Honorable Leonard Lance
U.S. House of Representatives
426 Cannon HOB
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative Lance,

On behalf of the Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nurses Society, I thank you for your introduction of H.RES.152 -- Recognizing the life-saving role of ostomy care and prosthetics in the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of people in the United States. As primary health care providers for the majority of patients with ostomies, we believe H. RES. 152 is an important statement that Congress should quickly ratify. Founded in 1968, the Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nurses Society (WOCN) is a professional, international nursing society of more than 4,600 healthcare professionals who are experts in the care of patients with wound, ostomy and/or incontinence needs.

As you know, the patient with an ostomy is dealing with an alteration in body function requiring both physical and psychosocial adaptation. Wound, Ostomy and Continence (WOC) nurses provide a substantial portion of the continuum of care for patients with ostomies. Specialized care for these individuals includes: preoperative evaluation and selection of the optimal site for the stoma (opening on the abdominal wall); facilitation of self-care postoperatively; establishment of an effective system for containing urine or stool; protection of the peristomal skin; and long-term patient education to support resumption of a productive lifestyle (e.g., guidance for managing the ostomy in the work setting, etc.). As clinicians, educators, researchers, consultants, and administrators, WOC nurses play a unique and essential role in treating patients with ostomies and thus, are acutely aware of the payment inequity imposed on these patients under Medicare's current reimbursement program.

In our experience as health care providers, there is little doubt that ostomy products are prosthetic devices and not medical supplies. Ostomy products are highly customizable, complex products that service a wide variety of patient needs. In fact, much of our practice includes helping patients identify the right products to fit their individual needs. We believe that ostomy supplies clearly fit the definition of prosthetic devices and should be reimbursed as such by Medicare.

Advances in ostomy equipment and supplies have significantly improved the quality of life for patients. However, the current reimbursement level for ostomy equipment and supplies has not kept pace with improved technology. Many retailers and mail order companies across the entire country have stopped carrying ostomy supplies because the level of Medicare reimbursement does not adequately cover their expenses. Other retailers, still offering these products, are not taking any new patients, or are severely restricting their inventories.

Furthermore, we remain very concerned about the future of Medicaid's reimbursement of ostomy supplies. As you know, Federal Medicaid statutes do not require coverage of ostomy products. As such, ostomy products are often targeted by states when they are forced to reduce Medicaid funding. In fact, states are actively considering eliminating coverage for ostomy products to deal with Medicaid budget gaps. This cannot be allowed to happen. Ostomy products are the very definition of "medically necessary" and under no circumstances should their funding be eliminated.

With 70,000 new ostomies created annually in the United States, patients need access to the necessary prosthetic supplies needed to manage temporary or permanent alterations in intestinal or urinary system function. WOCN strongly endorses H. RES. 152 and thanks you for bringing this issue the attention it deserves. If we can be of assistance to you in any way, please contact Chris Rorick of the Society's staff at chris.rorick@bryancave.com. Thank you again for taking up this important cause.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kathleen Lawrence".

Kathleen Lawrence, MSN, RN, CWOCN
President, Wound, Ostomy, Continence Nurses Society