

May 14, 2015

The Honorable Chris Van Hollen
1707 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Van Hollen:

On behalf of the Maryland Psychiatric Society (MPS) and the Washington Psychiatric Society (WPS), which represents 1,270 constituent psychiatric physicians statewide, I write to express opposition to any legislation that would define psychologists as “physicians” under Medicare, and respectfully ask that you oppose the so-called Medicare Mental Health Access Act (H.R. 794) if it is reintroduced in the 114th Congress.

It has been argued that this measure is necessary in order to remove unnecessary supervision requirements when treating Medicare beneficiaries, while improving access to care in rural or underserved communities. Unfortunately, the reality is that this legislation carries a dangerous implication for Americans who are elderly or disabled by potentially putting non-medically trained providers ultimately in charge of their medical care.

Psychologists are already permitted to direct the psychological care of Medicare beneficiaries under current law without direct supervision. However, inpatient facilities – which provide services for patients who often present with acute psychiatric disorders and co-occurring medical conditions – are required to have a physician supervising overall care in the facility in order to ensure quality medical treatment. Defining psychologists as “physicians” would pave a pathway for psychologists to supervise the medical care of patients. The MPS and WPS believe this is unnecessary, inappropriate, and potentially dangerous as psychologists generally lack any formal medical education or training. Furthermore, defining psychologists as “physicians” under Medicare sends an implied message of acceptance to elected officials in an increasing number of states who are approached every year to allow psychologists to prescribe potent psychiatric medications without the proper education and experience of a clinician trained in the medical model.

While psychologists are qualified and respected mental health providers who work closely with psychiatric physicians, psychologists are not physicians, and there is no substantiated reason for defining them as such under Medicare. The MPS and WPS respectfully request that you consider carefully upholding the foundational importance of proper medical supervision for our nation’s most vulnerable elderly and disabled individuals suffering from mental illness and oppose defining clinical psychologists as “physicians”.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



President, Maryland Psychiatric Society



President, Suburban Maryland Psychiatric Society