

April 9, 2018

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The Honorable Greg Walden, Chairman  
The Honorable Frank Pallone, Ranking Member  
Energy and Commerce Committee  
2125 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Walden and Ranking Member Pallone:

I want to thank you and the members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee for your efforts to address the opioid crisis. As you are aware, the incidents of opioid use rise among Americans monthly as the opioid epidemic continues to permeate every facet of American life. It does not distinguish between gender, or among age groups, nor consider socio-economic variables. For individuals and families in New Jersey, the consequence of opioid misuse manifest through drug overdose, which is the leading cause of accidental death in our state. Though admissions to drug treatment programs have increased dramatically in the last decade, heroin overdose in New Jersey is three times the national average. Yet, a pharmacist, as one of the most accessible and essential health care practitioners, is unable to apply their extensive expertise and training to answer calls for help. Each state in the union faces similar challenges to those experienced here in New Jersey, and each state has a ready and willing pool of pharmacists trained to provide care to their patients. In federally designated medically underserved areas (MUA), (in New Jersey, 15 out of 21 counties in the state are medically underserved according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) this means that there is a lack of patient care services within states, for at-risk populations that include the elderly. The data is too compelling to ignore.

Pharmacists are front-line health care professionals who interact with patients on a regular basis in a variety of settings (i.e.: local pharmacies, hospitals, clinics and residential facilities). In the forum of public opinion, pharmacists remain one of the most trusted professionals, and this recognition places them in a unique position to advocate for their patients and the care they need. As pharmacists integrate their services within existing health care delivery models, patient-centered care will increase. Pharmacists are equipped to practice within the changing health care landscape by practicing to the level of their education and experience.

Pharmacists play a unique role in patient care as the medication experts,

and with 89% of Americans living within five miles of a community pharmacy, they are frequently the health care professional that a patient will see most often. In New Jersey, for example, there are approximately 2,100 community pharmacies staffed by thousands of highly trained and experienced pharmacists. It is the pharmacist practicing in the community who will be available to respond immediately to an urgent call for help when a patient requests the opioid reversal agent, naloxone, for example. Currently, pharmacists are involved in pain management programs that include medication tapering services and medication assisted treatment programs related to opioid misuse. Pharmacists can help fight against the opioid epidemic by managing and optimizing the impact of medications, reviewing medications to help prevent overprescribing, monitoring care plans that support the physicians' treatments, and providing recommendations for non-opioid pain management alternatives while educating patients regarding opioids. However, Medicare beneficiaries' access to the health care practitioner with the most medication-related education and training is limited, often preventing the established and trusted relationship between patient and pharmacist from reaching its potential. The omission of pharmacists' services from Medicare Part B coverage restricts a coordinated, team-based approach to care. It is critical that patients and other health care providers can utilize the medication experts on a care team as efforts to enhance prevention, patient education, prescribing, tapering and treatment of substance use disorder are implemented.

We believe that H.R. 592 will provide new avenues to address opioid abuse and misuse and increase treatment options through pharmacist-provided care. Pharmacists can use their medication expertise to identify at-risk behaviors, manage pain treatments, and educate patients and families about the safe use of opioids and the use of medications to reverse the effects of narcotic drugs in emergency situations. H.R. 592, the *Pharmacy and Medically Underserved Areas Enhancement Act*, would provide medically underserved beneficiaries with access to Medicare Part B services from pharmacists, in compliance with scope of practice laws in each state.

The New Jersey Pharmacists Association (NJPhA) urges you to include H.R. 592 in the deliberations as the House Energy and Commerce Committee considers its options for addressing the opioid crisis. I appreciate the opportunity to submit these comments on behalf of NJPhA, and I look forward to providing additional information to assist you.

Sincerely,



Elise M. Barry, MS, CFRE  
Chief Executive Officer