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Testimony of ***Carol Burkhart Spicher, M.S., R.D., C.D.E., L.D.N.***
House Democratic Policy Committee Public Hearing
April 9, 2012

Good afternoon, members of the House Democratic Policy Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts and experiences with you this afternoon. My name is Carol Burkhart Spicher. I work as a Registered Dietitian and Certified Diabetes Educator in several places in Lancaster, PA. I am here today to ask you to work on legislation that would recognize Registered Dietitians as providers in all health insurance plans in Pennsylvania.

Most of my hours are spent with clients at General Internal Medicine located in Lancaster. Only adults (over 16 years of age) are seen there. I am grateful to be a team member with 22 other providers (physicians and nurse practitioners) in that medical practice.

I also work as a team member with a physician, nurse practitioners, and psychologists at a well known liberal arts college, Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, PA. I work there 8-10 hours/week to provide Medical Nutrition Therapy to students who are challenged with eating disorders, diabetes, high blood pressure and weight control. My third part-time job is with Lancaster General's Center for Wellness, where I lead a support group for women who live with Type 1 Diabetes. This role includes going out to community groups to discuss topics requested by them or leading a shopping tour in a local supermarket.

My personal interest in Type 1 Diabetes started when my younger and only brother was diagnosed at age 2. But in 1990 I took on the role of both patient and professional. I personally was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes at age 30. I now wear an insulin pump and understand how challenging it is to control that disease. I became a Certified Diabetes Educator within two years of my diagnosis.

At the Internal Medicine Office, I still see folks on a 1:1 basis, welcoming their family members or significant other to join in the counseling session. Beginning as early as 1992, I have spent many hours to become recognized as a provider within most of the insurance networks. Highmark is the only insurance company that refuses to cover my services. However, even though I've been assigned a provider number, coverage for my services is NOT guaranteed! The employers who are self-insured can choose to include or exclude coverage of medical nutrition therapy.

The inconsistencies are frustrating and challenging to both the provider and the client! Some policies allow only 1 visit per lifetime! Since diabetes is a progressive disease, I often inform patients on my first visit with them, that in 10 years, they will most likely need to take a long acting insulin. Put yourself in the client's position: Which visit would you want the insurance to cover?

The first one where the client is shocked to be diagnosed with diabetes? Or the visit 10 years later, when they need to be taught to inject themselves with insulin?

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Some policies mandate that their “covered lives” be seen by a “hospital dietitian”; which means that my services are not covered. This is especially frustrating to me since I have an ID badge from both hospital (Lancaster General for my Wellness Center job) and office settings. I’m the same provider, and offer similar skills in both counseling settings, but the insurances for some reason exclude dietitians employed in the office setting??!

I have letters written by physicians who support my request to you to make the insurance coverage for Medical Nutrition Therapy in PA more consistent. Dietitians are the experts in Nutrition. March was National Nutrition Month. This year the theme was “How to Build a Better Plate”. The government has chosen to replace a food pyramid with a Plate as a teaching tool. (Show them my teaching divided plate) I often explain to my patients that my role is to translate the doctor’s diet order into something they can understand and live with! So often we know that the “diet sheets” handed to the clients are not used, but stashed in the glove compartment or drawers as soon as they leave the appointment.

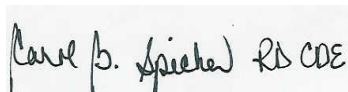
If your parent was newly diagnosed with diabetes, would you want them to be able to see a Registered Dietitian who would answer their questions and translate the words “diabetic diet” into a meal plan? Perhaps give them a specific list of healthy snacks? Or teach them how to read a food label? Or would you want them to go home and try to figure it out on their own or try to determine what’s true amidst the conflicting information that you, their child, would find on the internet??

I routinely start my visit with “How can I be helpful today? At the end, I ask them to summarize what their goals are: we write down three habits that they will try to change in the next three months. This week one of my patients sent me a list of questions that they want to discuss at the next appointment. I love that, when the client brings specific questions /topics that they want to discuss!

Often clients come with a goal of getting off medications. Seeing clients early in the diagnosis of diabetes makes it more likely that habit and lifestyle changes can be more effective, before their pancreas “poops out”. Patients smile when they admit that they’ve gone to Dunkin Donuts to eat 5 donuts on the way to my office, since they fear my taking away any food that tastes good. That’s ***not*** the image of the dietitian that I want you to grasp today! The finger wagging, NO NO NO scolding voice is not helpful. Instead, consider the Registered Dietitian as the preferred provider for Medical Nutrition Therapy! I read a sign by an elementary school: Education is 90% encouragement.

To summarize: My goal is to have you write and support the legislation that would recognize Registered Dietitians as providers in all health insurance plans in our state. I hope that when you or your family members need Medical Nutrition Therapy, it will be available for you/them. Let us help you build a healthier plate!

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Carol B. Spicher, RD, CDE.

Carol Spicher, M.S., R.D., C.D.E., L.D.N.

