

Written Testimony Submitted by Christina Brecht, MPH, RD, LDN

House Democratic Policy Committee Public Hearing

April 9, 2012

Since I am unable to testify in person, I am submitting my written testimony to be entered into the hearing's record.

My name is Christina Brecht. I am a Registered Dietitian from Monroe County, licensed to practice in Pennsylvania. I am asking that you work on legislation that would recognize Registered Dietitians as providers in all health insurance plans in our state.

I have been in private practice on a part time basis since 1988. At that time no insurance plans covered what I do - Medical Nutrition Therapy. Then Medicare, in 2002, recognizing the value and cost benefits of MNT approved coverage for Diabetes and Renal disease. Since that time additional insurance plans have begun to cover MNT for various diagnoses – such as diabetes, hyperlipidemia, hypertension, and obesity. I currently participate with Medicare, the Federal Employee program (FEP), First Priority Life (FPLIC) and First Priority Health (FPH). I do participate with my local BC/BS plan which is Blue Cross of Northeastern Pennsylvania so I am “in network” for many out of state BC/BS plans. I have received payment from some other private insurers on occasions when no other RD was available within a reasonable distance from the patient area. I have what is called a “661 flag” which means that I am “in network” for Premier Blue PPO. I have been denied claims submitted to Highmark for MNT, informed that Highmark does not credential the RD, LDN in Pennsylvania.

Additionally I am a tenured faculty member at East Stroudsburg University where I receive my medical benefits. My health insurer happens to be Highmark. So, as a member I can search for a health care provider. When I search for a registered dietitian I do find several – they are all in NJ and the closest one to me is 32.59 miles away. Not one RD in PA is listed – because, again, Highmark does not credential dietitians in PA. Highmark does provide for a limited number of “nutrition coaching” visits as part of its wellness benefit which can be provided by dietitians. Hoping to be added under this option I did inquire but was told that as a practitioner in Monroe County I could not participate. The closest “wellness coach” is approximately 1 hour from me. At this point only 12 counties have organizations that have been approved to provide this wellness option.

Registered Dietitians are the only health care professionals trained to provide MNT. The Institute of Medicine has previously acknowledged Registered Dietitians as the “single identifiable group of health-care professionals with standardized education, clinical training, continuing education and national credentialing requirements necessary” to be recognized as providers of these services. MNT is both a science and an art. RDs understand the science of nutrition and are uniquely qualified to translate this science into action steps for our patients. Achieving dietary change is challenging and complex. It is not simply about knowing what you should eat – if it were that simple we would not be facing an epidemic of obesity and diabetes. **The vast majority of my patients are referred to me directly by their medical doctor, who recognize the value of MNT.** The MD has neither the time nor specific training in strategies for health behavior change. My first appointment with a new patient typically lasts one hour. That is the minimum time it takes to thoroughly assess the patients' knowledge, attitudes, behaviors and design a roadmap to improved health. For a few hundred dollars I have helped those with conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and hyperlipidemia manage their diseases and in some cases get off their medication. It is ironic that Highmark will cover bariatric surgery, which costs thousands of dollars but will not cover counseling by a Registered Dietitian which would cost a few hundred dollars. It simply does not make economic sense. Interestingly I have been told by Highmark that MNT (procedure code

97802/97803) is a covered benefit under their plans if performed by a chiropractor or a doctor – even though these groups are not trained to provide MNT nor licensed to do so.

This note from a recent patient provides evidence regarding the value of MNT:

To Whom It May Concern:

I recently had need of a dietitian to aid me with my diagnoses of Diabetes Type II - My dietitian (Christina Brecht) has provided me with an invaluable service. She has educated me in the proper food selection to control the disease and improve my health. Not only have I been able to control my disease, but I have also lost weight and improved my overall health because of her skill as a dietitian. (Food selection, carb (carbohydrate) counting, # of meals daily, snacks, exercise, and the list goes on) I am most grateful to have had her services.

With Respect,
Sherry Gallagher
276 Center Road
Stroudsburg PA 18360

I have not received payment for my sessions with Sherry Gallagher. She has a BC/BS of Idaho plan through her employer. Prior to her initial appointment with me, both Sherry and I confirmed with her plan that MNT was covered and that I was “in network” as I participate with my local plan (NEPA). I was told by NEPA to mail all out of state claims to a Highmark PO Box in Camp Hill. In doing so, my claim was denied, as it was processed by Highmark -which does recognize Dietitians. Both Sherry and I have made several calls and inquiries after my claim was denied – but have been unable to straighten this out as yet.

I lose approximately 50% of the referrals made to me by MD’s due to insurance issues. Sometimes it is because the insurance carrier does not recognize dietitians; sometimes it is because a particular plan does not cover the diagnosis. For example- some plans do not cover MNT for Obesity alone unless there is a co -morbidity such as Diabetes. In a few cases patients will elect to pay out of pocket for a session with me, but rarely will they pay out of pocket for multiple sessions. I now have many calls from parents of obese children desperately seeking help as their pediatrician has warned them that their child may need medication for high blood pressure or diabetes in the near future. Last week, for example I saw a 12-yr. old boy, 5’2”, weighing 200 pounds. His blood tests indicated that he was “prediabetic”. His mother felt it was essential that they receive nutrition counseling, so she decided to pay out of pocket for a single session with me. A single session just scratches the surface as this family attempts to modify their lifestyle behaviors.

MNT is a medical service that has been proven to be safe and medically effective. The key to the effectiveness of these services is the -Registered Dietitian as the provider of the service. Once again, I ask that you work on legislation that would recognize Registered Dietitians as providers in all health insurance plans in our state. Our citizens/we deserve consistent access to these licensed healthcare professionals.