

Testimony of Julianne Hagan

House Democratic Policy Committee Public Hearing

April 9, 2012

Good afternoon. My name is Julianne Hagan and I am a licensed Registered Dietitian and Registered Nurse from Pittsburgh.

My expertise as a Registered Dietitian is currently not recognized by insurance companies who refuse to reimburse or reimburse at very low rates nutrition therapy services provided by Registered Dietitians. I am here today asking that you work on legislation that would recognize Registered Dietitians as providers in all health insurance plans in our state. This reform is extremely important to promote the health of our communities, and to protect citizens from a current system that inhibits access to high quality nutritional counseling.

First, it is important to recognize that there is a great need for nutritional services in our state. Twenty- nine percent of Pennsylvania's children are overweight or obese, and still more have nutrition-related conditions such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, poor growth or health conditions that may affect their long term health. The network of pediatric offices with which I work estimate that we serve 44,000 overweight or obese pediatric patients. Medical nutritional therapy has been proved effective to promote dietary changes that assist normal growth and development and prevent or treat chronic diseases. Eating habits also affect body image, attention span, and self esteem which are important contributors or barriers to children becoming productive members of society. As a form of preventative healthcare, MNT can slow escalating healthcare costs by preserving health before years of poor eating takes its toll on the children of Pennsylvania. Expanding access to services to Registered Dietitians can help families address problems early in life when change is more possible, effective and cost effective.

Now, acknowledging that nutritional services are integral to high quality healthcare in Pennsylvania, let us turn to how current insurance systems restrict access to these services, and result in an economically inefficient system.

When insurance companies provide little or no reimbursement for services provided by Registered Dietitians it undoubtedly limits the accessibility of the service. Highmark Insurance Company, for example, recognizes me as credentialed provider under their Federal Employee Plans but not under other plans. Plans also may cover nutrition counseling through dietitians hired by Giant Eagle and YMCAs but not through me, a credentialed provider.

Services related to nutrition may be provided by a physician or by a dietitian billing under the physician, however this increases the cost of services and takes time away from higher-level providers, such as physicians. For example, if a pediatric patient comes back to the physician repeatedly for nutrition counseling or weight monitoring, the cost is much higher than if the same service were offered by a dietitian whose billed amount is much less and whose expertise is often greater in the area of nutrition.

Currently, low reimbursements prohibit my employer from offering nutrition counseling services to the 145,000 pediatric clients served by our 31 community pediatric practices. Our network of

offices offers an integrated approach to preventing and treating childhood obesity through basic counseling to children and their families; however, this counseling is provided by registered nurses, who are trained by a colleague and myself. Nurses are already in high demand and their time and expertise is limited. As a licensed nurse and dietitian, I can personally attest to the different training and knowledge of these two professions, and while our nurses provide a great service many of our patients need nutrition counseling beyond what nurse's can or should provide. Unfortunately, the lack of coverage prevents my organization from hiring dietitians to address this need.

Finally, the current situation allows false information about nutrition to propagate in our state. Low reimbursement rates result in an inadequate supply of patients to support the practice of Registered Dietitians. The result is that affluent citizens pay out of pocket for Nutrition Therapy from sometimes unqualified providers, while poor and middle class citizens, who are already disproportionately overweight, rely on information from the media, fad diets, chiropractors, food companies, vitamin companies or cost-ineffective sources such as physicians. I live in the Fox Chapel Area of Pittsburgh and am acquainted with someone who did an 18 month online course, but has the financial resources to market her new nutrition coaching business and thus has numerous clients. She believes her approach is scientific yet makes recommendations that directly conflict with the latest recommendations made by the USDA Dietary Guidelines 2010, Institute of Medicine and other evidence based reports. Misinformation about nutrition is rampant but the key to scientifically sound and evidence-based nutrition therapy is having a Registered Dietitian providing the service. The Institute of Medicine, has acknowledged the Registered Dietitian 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. Furthermore, RDs are the licensed nutrition healthcare providers in PA, meaning the state has already recognized the fact that we are qualified providers of nutrition service. Neither children nor adults should be seeing unqualified, unlicensed, individuals for nutritional guidance and paying out of pocket for a service so integral to their health.

In conclusion, the "Nutrition and You: Trends 2011" survey revealed that six in ten consumers say they would be interested in a consultation with a Registered Dietitian if it were covered by health insurance. As I have covered here today, nutritional counseling services are not only essential to the health of our state, but the current system has lead to an economically inefficient and uncontrolled market for nutrition information. In order to make it feasible for organizations and individuals to offer medical nutrition therapy services, reimbursement rates for services provided by Registered Dietitians must be higher than they currently are, in line with their education, expertise and their long term positive effect on health care costs.

Once again, I ask that you work on legislation that would recognize Registered Dietitians as providers in all health insurance plans in our state. The citizens of Pennsylvania deserve consistent access to these licensed healthcare professionals.