

Written Testimony Submitted by Kathy P. Alfieri, BS, 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 Kathy Partenope Alfieri, BS, RD, LDN. I am a Registered Dietitian and Clinical Nutrition Manager from Dunmore, Pennsylvania. 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. I have 33 years experience in Dietetics; Hospital based nutrition, Home Health, Private Practice, and as a Clinical Educator of Student Dietitians.

We are licensed healthcare providers in the state, yet insurance companies do not consistently recognize us and credential us as providers under their plans. This creates barriers to access cost-effective services that could save our state money and improve the health of our citizens. It also creates health disparities among our citizens. I'd like to start by saying that I respect all fields of Healthcare and feel they all have their place and purpose in the community. However Registered Dietitians are specifically trained in the science, psychology, teaching, and communication aspect of Medical Nutritional Therapy and Education.

For example, many hospital employees, including nurses, will come to me or other Registered Dietitians at the facility the day after an appointment with their physician and say, "...I need your help, I don't understand." It is usually in regard to the doctor's recommendation that they follow a Diet, for example: Low Cholesterol Diet, Diabetic, or Low Salt. The employee has no idea where to begin. Even when he or she has been given a Diet Education Sheet, it's not adjusted to his or her needs. I can count on this occurring at least three times per week. A physician writes a prescription for medication treatment, and the pharmacist expert fills the prescription. In the same manner, a doctor writes the prescription for nutritional therapy and Education, and the RD expert is the healthcare professional to complete the therapy. But there is one catch, insurance companies are not recognizing Registered Dietitians as providers of the service.

One patient I was counseling was trying to conceive a child. She had Poly Cystic Ovarian Syndrome [PCOS] which can make conception difficult or even impossible. Blood sugar control is needed, and treatment is often an oral medication which not all patients tolerate. In this case she did not tolerate the medication, nor did she tolerate even the many pills her chiropractor had given her. As a team, I worked with the patient and her physician, and we came up with a treatment plan. After a short time, the patient was pregnant and had good blood sugar control.

An employee came to me to discuss her husband's new diagnosis of Celiac Disease [they can't take any Gluten / Flour]. Once again, she had no idea how to start the diet or even how to shop for the appropriate gluten free items. The employee, her husband, and I worked together. After this, her husband was able to gain healthy weight and muscle back and started feeling stronger.

People in the community every day call me as an RD to ask questions, because they consider RDs to be the experts in the field of nutrition.

Childhood Obesity is a large problem in Pennsylvania and throughout the country I reference the American Medical Associations recommendations to Physicians in prevention and treatment of this problem. Obesity in children can cause teenage diseases such as Diabetes and high blood pressure. Then as adults it can cause heart disease and multiple other debilitating, high cost healthcare illnesses. Childhood obesity is an increasingly serious problem effecting 13.9 percent of children two to five years of age; 18.8 percent of children six to 11 years of age; and 17.4 percent of adolescents 12 to 19 years of age in America.

Childhood Obesity: Highlights of AMA Expert Committee Recommendations. [July 1, 2008](#).

Source <http://www.aafp.org/afp/2008/0701/p56.html>

1st stage: includes physicians to assess key **dietary habits among other habits**

2nd stage: (STRUCTURED WEIGHT-MANAGEMENT PROTOCOL) involves providing a more structured plan for children and families that includes a low-energy-dense, balanced diet; structured meals; supervised physical activity of at least 60 minutes daily [12](#) ; one hour or less of screen time per day; and increased self-monitoring of these behaviors through completion of logs ([Table 311](#)). Family physicians may require help from allied care professionals or special expertise to implement this step.

In reference to the “Allied Care Professional or Special expertise,” the State of PA has already decided that the Registered Dietitian is that person. This is evidenced by the Team education program that will be starting. Pennsylvania will be educating Family Practice Physician & Registered Dietitian Teams. Those teams will then become certified to hold education Programs for Physicians on prevention and treatment plans to prevent Childhood Obesity. The State has already determined that the RD is the professional with the expertise to supply the treatment of Childhood obesity. Now we, the Registered Dietitians, urge our legislators to speak with CMC and other PA state insurers to recognize RDs as the provider of Nutritional Care and Prevention of Obesity as well as other health conditions such as High Blood Pressure and High Triglycerides.

However, most important is our communities’ health.

Recognition of RDs by insurance plans with third party payment is important. Registered Dietitians are licensed healthcare providers in the state, meaning the state has already recognized the fact that we are qualified providers of nutrition services. We are also nutrition experts and the best (i.e., effectiveness, cost) qualified providers of nutrition services. **We have all had at least 4 years of nutrition education on every disease state. Our education although heavy in science also includes courses in psychology, behavior management, and communication. We also need fifteen hours per year of continuing education to maintain our registration and PA license.** We focus every day on improving the health of the population, disease prevention to help control the cost of healthcare.

There is a multitude of data that demonstrates the cost-savings of RD-provided nutrition counseling. As just one example, a study conducted at Massachusetts General Hospital demonstrated a savings of \$4.28 for each dollar spent on MNT. MNT services provided by RDs are less expensive than physician office visits and hospitalizations for complications of disease such as diabetes that could be averted by nutrition interventions. Also, nutrition interventions can reduce and even eliminate the need for costly long-term medications to treat chronic diseases.

Nutrition and diet are known to be associated with seven of the top ten leading causes of death in the United States today, including the Big Three: heart disease, cancer and stroke. Diet and nutrition are also factors in other chronic conditions such as pulmonary disease, diabetes, liver disease, arteriosclerosis and kidney disease. Not to mention the role of nutrition in curbing the obesity epidemic facing both children and adults across our state. Lack of access to RD-provided medical nutrition therapy services certainly has played a role in the escalating prevalence of these conditions and the associated growth in the costs of treating them. Opening up access to these services from the nutrition experts can help to rein in spiraling health care costs in our state.

NOTE: Think about financial impact of these diseases (if not well managed) on the economy (lost wages, absenteeism, worker productivity); think about impact on quality of life of the citizens of PA.

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. The Institute of Medicine has previously 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.

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 deserve consistent access to these licensed healthcare professionals.

Sincerely,

Kathy Partenope Alfieri, RD, LDN