

**Testimony of Nancy Wagner MBA, RD, LDN**  
House Democratic Policy Committee Public Hearing  
April 9, 2012

Good afternoon, members of the House Democratic Policy Committee. My name is Nancy Wagner and I am a renal dietitian. Today I am testifying along with the Medical Director at the dialysis clinic where I work. Recently I asked him to tell me what he says to his patients who have diabetes and need to follow a diet. He started to laugh and said "I hand them a piece of paper and tell them to stay away from sweets". Because I have nothing but the utmost respect and admiration for my Medical Director I am fairly certain he was joking with me however all kidding aside, this is a reality for a lot of the patients that I see. I would like to speak to you about why improving the public's access to proper nutrition counseling by a registered dietitian is important to me and the citizens of Pennsylvania. As I stated, I work with patients who have End Stage Renal Disease (ESRD) and who are on dialysis. One month ago Governor Tom Corbett proclaimed March 8, 2012 Pennsylvania Kidney Awareness Day citing that more than 15,573 Pennsylvanians are receiving dialysis, over 6,000 Pennsylvanians are awaiting kidney transplants, 26 million Americans have Chronic Kidney Disease and millions of others are at increased risk. The cost for one dialysis treatment is approximately \$250 and most people receive dialysis three times/week. If my math is correct, the healthcare costs for dialysis patients in our state are more than 50 million dollars per month! Dialysis treatments are paid for primarily through Medicare, Medicaid and private insurance companies. As we know, chronic diseases such as End Stage Renal Disease disproportionately affect minorities and lower income individuals and so most of the costs are paid for with our tax dollars. I tell you this because access to appropriate care involving early detection and treatment can often keep chronic kidney disease from getting worse and can prevent the need for very costly dialysis or transplant surgery. Diabetes and high blood pressure are the leading causes of kidney failure so the majority of the patients that I see either have diabetes or high blood pressure or both. When I initially meet with a new patient I perform a thorough nutritional assessment and start the diet education process. If diabetes is the root cause of kidney failure then I will ask: who manages your diabetes, what kind of a diet do you follow and who educated you about the diabetic diet? Unfortunately, I have never had a patient tell me that a registered dietitian instructed them on the diabetic diet. Some of the things my patients have said to me are: "I was never told to see a dietitian about what I should eat" or "my doctor told me to just avoid sugar". I've even had patients say to me "If I knew I would end up on dialysis I would have followed a diet but no one told me what to eat until now". Many of my patients are instructed by their doctor (who is often their family doctor, not an endocrinologist who specializes in diabetes) to give themselves a certain amount of insulin based on their current blood sugar level. This is not the best way to control blood sugars – chasing blood sugars rather than maintaining acceptable levels. A registered dietitian is trained to teach patients to calculate the amount of carbohydrates they consume and then match that amount to their insulin dose. This is a much more effective method of controlling blood sugars. Over time, uncontrolled blood sugars damage the small blood vessels of the kidneys thus leading to kidney failure. Unfortunately, when I see my patients, the damage is already done and so my focus is on disease management.

Medical Nutrition Therapy (MNT) is the official term used to describe the diet education and nutrition counseling dietitians provide to the public. One of the most rewarding aspects of my job is providing MNT to my patients. The renal diet is very nutrient specific and can be restrictive. Having too much or too little of certain vitamins, minerals and fluids can be life threatening, even resulting in death. I teach my patients about which foods they can and cannot eat and how much they should eat. No other health care provider could even begin to offer the type of in-depth nutrition counseling that is necessary for patients with kidney disease. Every month I review their blood work and their diets with them. Those who follow their diet do very well on dialysis and have fewer hospitalizations and live longer. I recently overheard one of my patients say to another "diet is everything, if you follow the diet you will feel good". I was so proud because, of course, this is the goal - helping our patients to stay healthy while living with

dialysis. Medical Nutrition Therapy provided to my patients directly affects their overall health and improves clinical outcomes.

I applaud Governor Corbett for raising awareness about chronic kidney disease, a devastating disease that affects so many in our state. Early detection and treatment can often keep this disease from getting worse and may even prevent the need for dialysis. In a study conducted a few years back it was found that a major barrier to the appropriate utilization of outpatient nutrition counseling was the lack of third-party reimbursement for the service. Let me be clear, there are insurance plans that do cover Medical Nutrition Therapy provided by a registered dietitian, however it is inconsistent across the state and from plan to plan. You will hear stories today about how frustrating it is for dietitians to have to turn patients away because they are not a preferred provider under the patient's insurance plan. This is why I ask that registered dietitians must be included as preferred providers in all insurance plans in our state. Creating barriers to access to our services has negative consequences and creates health disparities among our citizens. Medical Nutrition Therapy, involving in-depth individualized nutrition counseling, improves clinical outcomes and reduces healthcare costs in terms of prevention, wellness and disease management.

In short, Medical Nutrition Therapy works!

It has been an honor to read this testimony to you today. Thank you.