

July 5, 2011

The Honorable Tom Price
403 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Price:

As the world's largest professional organization of, by and for audiologists, with over 11,000 members, the American Academy of Audiology applauds your efforts to allow health care providers to freely contract for non-covered Medicare services, and we appreciate your recently-introduced legislation, H.R. 1700, the Medicare Patient Empowerment Act. We support the intent behind this legislation and agree that Medicare patients deserve more choices in their reimbursement of services.

As you may know, audiologists are professionals who hold master's or doctoral-level degrees. They diagnose, manage, and treat both hearing and balance disorders and have functioned in this capacity since the advent of state licensure laws that have evolved over the past 30 years. However, H.R. 1700 does not include audiologists among the list of providers who would be eligible to privately contract with patients. Given the consistent devaluation of audiology codes through the Medicare Physician Fee Schedule, and the unstable environment that exists due to the flawed SGR formula, audiologists already find it difficult to remain within the Medicare system.

For audiology practices focused on providing services to those with balance disorders and fall risks, the current reimbursement environment is crippling. If reimbursement continues to fall, or does not adjust to the current market value of services, additional audiology practices will be forced to close, many in the already underserved rural community, further inhibiting patient access to care. Some practices have already begun restricting the number of tests provided to Medicare beneficiaries as providing these services now comes at a deficit to the provider. Given the devastating effects these cuts have on access for Medicare beneficiaries, we wholeheartedly support your efforts to provide them with greater options within the system.

Hearing impairment is one of the most common conditions affecting older adults, with approximately 33 percent of Americans aged 60 years and over and 40 to 50 percent of those aged 75 years and older, experiencing hearing loss. Hearing loss is a major barrier to participating in society, both economically and socially and, if left untreated, can result in

isolation and depression among senior citizens. By allowing more choice in these challenging times, a greater number of audiologists will be able to provide Medicare beneficiaries with the care they need to allow them to remain active members of society. As such, I hope you will consider amending H.R. 1700 to include audiologists.

Thank you for your sponsorship of H.R. 1700, and for your consideration of our comments. If you would like to further discuss this matter, or if you have any questions, please contact Melissa Sinden, the Academy's Senior Director of Government Relations at msinden@audiology.org, or by phone at (202) 544-9335.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T Walden', written in a cursive style.

Therese Walden, AuD
President
American Academy of Audiology