

March 23, 2020

Co-Chairs, Representative Paul Holvey and Senator Arnie Roblan, and members of the Joint Special Committee on COVID-19 Response:

We have seen our community of leaders and health care providers respond in heroic and rapid fashion to the threat that COVID-19 poses to the health of our community.

The strong actions taken to minimize spread are incredibly powerful and necessary to protect our population. Primary Care providers are rapidly responding with critical actions such as accelerating and expanding telehealth care, segregating care between sick and well populations, treating patients in their cars and other fashions to maintain social/physical distancing and other critical containment protocols.

Primary care and especially pediatric care, are incredibly critical and essential services during this pandemic. We learned from recent H1N1 outbreaks that primary care access is essential to continuing to vaccinate against those illnesses we can contain, and to support health maintenance for all the ongoing medical, mental and behavioral health conditions that affect a community in increasing fashion during crises. Yet there may be unintended interpretations or consequences from communications about essential health services during this response time which is likely to last many months.

For example, the Oregon Public Health Division and Oregon Health Authority sent a notice to providers on Friday March 20th informing them that the state's immunization reminders system has been suspended in support of Governor Brown as an action meant to delay non-essential medical visits. Yet this same notice also encourages providers to continue to immunize patients according to clinical protocol.

We urge you to consider primary care essential in this time where Primary Care Physicians (PCPs) are known to offer a critical role in helping children, adults and families cope with and manage their health. Primary care providers are already witnessing increased patient and family break-down. Patients and families need access to medical and health management support and guidance in order to thwart an increase in substance abuse, domestic abuse, child abuse and suicide. Primary care health maintenance visits are the designed method to enact the provider-patient relationship to create an opportunity to respond to these health and risk concerns. In a time when the masses are experiencing financial duress, social isolation, and disrupted community supports and outlets, it is imperative to maintain primary health care supports. Our state has invested greatly in care for children and the Patient-centered Primary Care Home model to promote the health and wellness of our community. Now more than ever is the time to capitalize on those structures.

While primary care and health maintenance remain essential needs, so remains the need for viral containment. Primary care providers must be able to deliver essential services via telehealth approaches as well as in person care when they deem it necessary but while utilizing every precaution for social/physical distancing.

It is urgently requested that policies in our state address both the COVID-19 containment effort AND recognize primary care health maintenance as critical and essential. Delayed care of infants, children and adolescents threatens the long-term health trajectory of our community. Even with telehealth approaches, it also is expected to create a supply and demand crisis, compromising access to care when it is needed.

For reference, please find the following examples of essential care provided by pediatric primary care providers. PCPs are taking monumental actions to deliver these in socially responsible ways including accelerated use of telehealth visits. It is critical that health payment policies align with and pay providers for delivery of both acute and health maintenance care via appropriate virtual telehealth approaches.

There is an urgent need to recognize the importance of eliminating barriers to primary care and pediatrics that might come from lagging telehealth payment policies or declaration of non-essential primary care services. These barriers will have unintended consequences to the preservation of health in our community.

Samples of essential care for children and youth that may be delivered via telehealth or in person when necessary:

- Acute care visits where children present with viral or other symptoms that benefit from pediatrician care, even virtually, rather than sending the child into the hospital setting.
- Preventive visits for 0-3 population – there are developmental milestones in clinical protocols that cannot be replicated later – such as developmental evaluations and screens, and anticipatory guidance for quickly changing needs and behaviors.
- Childhood immunizations– there are short windows for select vaccines such as Rotavirus which are critical to prevent the spread of viral disease.
- Visits for chronic medical and mental/behavioral health conditions needing immediate attention, many of which can be delivered virtually, and some of which will be exacerbated by the stresses of COVID-19.
- Health maintenance visits for children and adolescents - we need to manage depression, anxiety and other factors that increase high-risk behaviors such as suicide and substance use. Health care supports, including virtual care should not be suspended for such critical care during a crisis time when youth are disrupted from their community and school supports.

Delayed primary care for health maintenance has significant health care implications, particularly in pediatrics.

- Health management of rapidly developing children and youth is critical. Preventive care schedules that enable age-sensitive and developmentally-sensitive protocols such as screenings and immunizations are the designed protections to uncover and prevent health crises.
- In times of heightened community stress and anxiety, the vulnerable child and adolescent age groups quickly need access to their primary care and medical home team, including behavioral and mental health care supports that are at risk of being beyond capacity.
- Unintended implications that occur behind the closed doors of homes are already being noticed by primary care providers regarding the relationships between parents, children and siblings during the “stay home and save lives” period. Stress and anxiety over health and financial concerns are elevated during this period. Parents and families need the trusted advice of their PCP for physical and mental health support to navigate these new challenges created by the social and physical isolation. We need to limit frustration levels that can lead to increased child and domestic abuse, increased substance abuse, and suicide.

Complexity and restrictions on telehealth services must be eliminated to allow continued care from the Primary Care Provider.

Pediatric practices are quickly advancing delivery of telehealth care, including video, online and phone visits to enable connection with the PCP without the increased risk of exposure. However, there is continued uncertainty in the reliability of equitable and appropriate compensation for this care.

Payment to health care providers has continued to create challenges and confusion, yet it is imperative that telehealth visits provided by the PCPs are valued equally and appropriately by all health plans to increase access to care during this time of public crisis. These telehealth visits need to include preventive care visits, which, in many instances (especially older children), can be completely performed in a virtual environment with a high level of medical accuracy and appropriateness.

In addition, complexity and varied reimbursement methodologies for the provision of these services needs to be eliminated. Location of the physician and patient during the delivery of care, and type of services provided virtually needs to be flexible now and in the future to allow care to be delivered in a manner that increases access to care in a safe manner. These mechanisms allow physicians the ability to address the needs of the patients before the health needs are elevated.

Pediatricians are ready and willing to do their part to protect the community during the COVID-19 outbreak. It is our job to ensure patient access to care now and in the future, is available for the long term physical and mental health of our community.

Please let me know if you have any questions about the importance of maintaining critical services provided at the pediatric office during this time of crisis. We are happy to discuss any of the above areas in further detail.

Sincerely,



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