



MEMORANDUM

To: Rep. Andrea Salinas, Chair, House Interim Committee on Health Care
Rep. Cedric Hayden, Vice Chair, House Interim Committee on Health Care
Rep. Rachel Prusak, Vice Chair, House Interim Committee on Health Care
Members of the House Interim Committee on Health Care

From: Courtni Dresser, Director of Government Relations

Date: May 22, 2020

Re: Oregon's Healthcare Workforce and COVID-19 Impacts

Oregon physicians and physician assistants are serving on the front lines of this pandemic and are providing care even with immense challenges before them. One ongoing challenge clinics are facing is access to adequate personal protective equipment, or PPE. The PPE issue spans across healthcare settings. Clinicians in small rural clinics, pediatric clinics, and other settings are without adequate supply of PPE. In a recent survey conducted by the OMA of physicians and PAs across Oregon, only 33% reported having access to an adequate supply of PPE.

Due to this crisis, providers have had to quickly change how they provide care. The use of telemedicine has soared in the past ten weeks. Although many clinicians offered some type of telemedicine, the mass increase in telemedicine visits—which ramped up in record time—has created some challenges, in particular with reimbursement policy for telephonic and video patient visits.

Medicare and Medicaid were quick to ensure that both video and telephone telehealth appointments were reimbursed at the same level as in-office appointments. Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) plans, regulated by the federal government, are not paying with parity, and a Congressional bill has been introduced with the hope that this will change. In Oregon, DCBS issued an advisory encouraging payment parity, but not mandating it. Nearly all insurers in Oregon are paying for some type of virtual visits, though this is not consistent—some payors actually spell out policies for telephone in addition to other types of telemedicine visits.

The coding and modifier use is not consistent between payors, which leads to confusion and lack of reimbursement. The other pressing issue is that most insurers' policies of reimbursement and coverage of telemedicine during this pandemic are set to expire in the next few weeks. Clinicians and patients need those regulations extended because the need for, and use of, telemedicine visits are not going to end any time soon.

In the recent survey conducted by the OMA, more than 90% of respondents reported that their practices had been negatively financially impacted by the pandemic. Many reported that clinicians and administrative staff have been furloughed, and many reported salary decreases. Federal funding, along with staff and salary reductions, and in some cases even personal loans from physicians, are keeping many practices afloat, but this is not sustainable. Additional assistance is essential to keep Oregon's healthcare infrastructure intact. Grants, advance payments, and tax relief are necessary and are encouraged policy asks of the state.

We have also asked the Governor and the legislature to protect healthcare clinicians by granting liability protections for actions they take during this emergency when carrying out the Executive Orders the state has issued. Physicians who have had to delay non-emergent procedures due to the Executive Order could be subject to lawsuits even though they had limited choices in delaying that care. The lift of the ban on non-emergent procedures is welcome and appreciated, but notably it is not a full lift as caseloads are limited to 50%, and to procedures that have adequate PPE. Patient care will still be prioritized based on urgency, while other procedures will continue to be delayed. Clinicians deserve this protection.

Finally, the challenges before our healthcare workforce are none we have ever seen before. Clinicians' fears for their patients, their staffs, their families, their practices, and themselves have led to an increased concern for clinician burnout and overall wellness. The OMA continues to remind our members to use the wellness programs available to them. When this is over, and it will end someday, our goal is to ensure that we continue to have the healthcare infrastructure and a healthy and vibrant workforce needed to move us out of this pandemic.

The Oregon Medical Association serves and supports over 8,000 physicians, physician assistants and student members in their efforts to improve the health of all Oregonians. Additional information can be found at www.theOMA.org.