

February 11/2019

Re: Oregon Association of Naturopathic Physicians Pay Parity Bill

To the Healthcare Committees of the Oregon State Legislature,

I'm writing today to express my support for the Naturopathic Physician Pay Parity bill (SB-734). I am a naturopathic physician practicing in Eugene since 2010, and I would like to share my experience working as an ND, as well as to discuss and the challenges we face in trying to deliver healthcare.

As I expect many of you know, naturopathic physicians have been licensed in Oregon since the 1920's and have a broad scope of primary care practice – a scope that has been consistently expanded even in the last decade. We are the first point of contact for the healthcare systems for a great many Oregonians and manage the entire gamut of healthcare conditions that patients may present with. We graduate from accredited 4-year doctoral-level programs, and a good number of us then complete residencies. We manage medications (natural and pharmaceutical), order imaging, and refer to specialists. Again, I expect that if you're serving on the healthcare committee that you know much of this.

Despite our responsibilities as primary care physicians (perhaps most sacredly, the development of long-term relationships with patients) we face a hurdle that no other PCP faces. As my colleagues' data review with the Oregon Health Authority clearly shows, insurers consistently pay us about 60% of what they pay conventional physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants. Of course, 60% is the average, and these were numbers found in 2018. Many insurers reimburse even less, and the further back in time you go, the lower the relative reimbursements were.

In my own career, I struggled with maintaining an independent practice – and expanding it to offer the care I believed my patients deserved – as a direct result of this pay parity issue. When my daughter went to her pediatrician for a sore throat, the bill was often \$150-200. When I managed a complex patient with diabetes, hypertension, and asthma, I was happy to get \$100. (And sometimes, would get as little as \$15 from the insurer). This was a major (though not sole) factor in me closing my private practice in 2015, with repercussions for both my support staff and my patients. My phone's contact list is similarly full of NDs offering great primary care that have shuttered their doors, closed themselves off from insurance, or in some other fashion have quit trying to practice primary care as a direct result of this major disincentive.

I consider myself lucky. I was hired by Lane County Health and Human Services* to work in their primary care clinic. I order imaging, refer to specialists, manage

medications, and have helped develop County policy around opioids and pain management. The Oregon Health Plan, you see, reimburses all providers at the same rate – allowing Lane County to hire an ND as a PCP at a reasonable salary. But even at that, I know that my future career opportunities are limited. If I wanted to join a different primary care clinic, or perhaps even a chronic pain clinic, that clinic would have to be willing to accept 40% less for insurance reimbursement. Most clinics can't consider this, even if they did want me on staff.

Oregon has a shortage of primary care physicians. The naturopathic profession in our state has worked diligently – with tremendous support from this legislative body – to move away from the fringes and step into the primary care role. And yet we're expected to provide the same quality of care while being reimbursed 60 cents on the dollar. We don't have one hand tied behind our back – just four fingers.

I am asking that you continue to support the naturopathic profession, as we try to support the health of Oregonians, and vote yes on the Naturopathic Physician Pay Parity bill.

Sincerely,

Timothy "Bill" Walter, ND

* - I'm writing today as a private citizen, and nothing in this letter should be construed to represent Lane County in any way.