September 20, 2017

The Honorable Charles Schumer  The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader  Majority Leader
United States Senate  United States Senate
S-221 U.S. Capitol  S-230 U.S. Capitol
Washington, DC 20510  Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer:

I am writing on behalf of the American Society of Hematology (ASH) to express the Society’s concerns with the Cassidy-Graham-Heller-Johnson Amendment to H.R. 1628, the American Health Care Act. This legislation would reduce access to comprehensive coverage for the patients that our members serve, patients with rare debilitating chronic diseases such as hemophilia or sickle cell disease, and patients with blood cancers such as acute myeloid leukemia (AML) or multiple myeloma. The Society urges the Senate to preserve access to affordable, high quality health care for all Americans and to focus their efforts on stabilizing the individual insurance market.

ASH represents over 17,000 clinicians and scientists worldwide who are committed to the study and treatment of blood and blood-related diseases. These disorders encompass malignant hematologic disorders such as leukemia, lymphoma, and multiple myeloma, as well as non-malignant conditions such as sickle cell anemia, thalassemia, bone marrow failure, venous thromboembolism, and hemophilia. In addition, hematologists were pioneers in demonstrating the potential of treating various hematologic diseases through the transplantation of bone marrow stem cells, and we continue to be innovators in the fields of stem cell biology, regenerative medicine, transfusion medicine, and gene therapy. ASH membership is comprised of basic, translational, and clinical scientists, as well as physicians who are providing care to patients in diverse settings including teaching and community hospitals, as well as private practices.

Throughout Congress’ efforts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act (ACA), ASH has continued to advocate for access to affordable, high quality health care for all Americans and has opposed changes that will undermine the patient protections to ensure that patients with costly hematologic disorders can get the specialized care they require. Once again, ASH urges caution as Congress considers changes to the ACA. The Graham-Cassidy Amendment does not differ from the alternatives already considered by Congress, and it will invalidate the patient protections established by the ACA.

The Society is very supportive of the private insurance reforms that now prohibit health plans from discriminating against patients with pre-existing conditions or imposing limits on annual and lifetime benefits. The public and private insurance reforms that are currently in place have been especially impactful for individuals with blood diseases and disorders. For example, the patient who has a blood cancer such as multiple myeloma and relies on a combination of expensive therapies could reach their annual cap within a few months; meanwhile, the patient living with a blood disorder that has high
treatment costs such as hemophilia could reach their lifetime cap within a few years. Additionally, ASH wants to guarantee that individuals eligible for Medicaid do not lose their ability to acquire affordable health care coverage and essential health benefits. This is critical for patients with sickle cell disease, an inherited chronic disorder affecting nearly 100,000 Americans who often experience lifelong complications including stroke, acute chest syndrome (a condition that lowers the level of oxygen in the blood), organ damage, and other disabilities.

Importantly, the Graham-Cassidy Amendment undermines these protections since it allows the states to remove the essential health benefits (EHB) requirement, which will undermine the ACA’s patient protections. The provisions to repeal the ACA cost-sharing reductions and Medicaid expansion, as well as the move to block grants and per-capita caps, are particularly concerning as they threaten to reduce access to affordable, high-quality care for millions of Americans. By moving Medicaid to a per-capita allotment, states would have greater difficulty in responding to fluctuations in the price and demand for health care services. Additionally, ASH is concerned about any proposed elimination of the Public Health and Prevention Fund, which has supported many critical projects at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) including investments in immunizations and health-care associated infections. Currently the Fund comprises approximately 12 percent of CDC’s budget and should be preserved.

Changes implemented through the ACA benefited many of the patients that our members serve. We remain committed to protecting access to affordable, high-quality, care for all patients with hematologic diseases and disorders. Again, ASH cannot support the Cassidy-Graham-Heller-Johnson Amendment to H.R. 1628, the American Health Care Act, because it would undermine patient access to care. ASH looks forward to working with you to address the challenges and opportunities impacting hematology practice, as well as issues impacting hematology patients. Please feel free to contact either myself or Leslie Brady (lbrady@hematology.org, 202-292-0264) if you have any questions or would like any additional information about hematology.

Sincerely,

Kenneth C. Anderson, MD
President

Cc: United States Senate