



March 4, 2020

The Honorable Alex Azar
Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, NW
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The SARS-CoV-2 virus and COVID-19 is rapidly becoming a public-health emergency that poses a growing risk to Americans, especially people in geographic areas where ongoing community spread has been reported; physicians, nurses, other healthcare professionals caring for patients with COVID-19; individuals within close contact of people with COVID-19; and travelers returning to the United States from certain international locations.

The American College of Physicians (ACP) offers the following recommendations to inform the administration's public health response from the standpoint of frontline internal medicine physicians. Internal medicine specialists and subspecialists care for many of the patients at greatest risk from COVID-19 including the elderly and patients who have pre-existing conditions like heart disease, asthma, and diabetes. ACP is the largest medical specialty organization and the second-largest physician group in the United States. ACP members include 159,000 internal medicine physicians (internists), related subspecialists, and medical students. Internal medicine physicians are specialists who apply scientific knowledge and clinical expertise to the diagnosis, treatment, and compassionate care of adults across the spectrum from health to complex illness.

ACP is encouraged by President Trump's commitment to work with Congress to locate funding for research, prevention, control, and treatment of illnesses associated with SARS-CoV-2 at a level that is commensurate with this declared international public health emergency. The bipartisan agreement reached today by congressional leadership is an important step to providing the necessary resources. We look forward to reviewing the specific provisions in the legislation.

With no time to waste—with at least six¹ COVID-19 deaths and 102 test-documented cases in the United States and rising concerns - it is vital that there be greater collaboration and communication with internal medicine physicians, federal agencies, and public health authorities, including guidance and support to state and local health departments. Information distributed to the public must be clear, appropriate, and consistent. Further, the College supports the lifting of telehealth restrictions within the Medicare program for physicians during a national emergency, similar to Section 9 of the bipartisan and bicameral CONNECT for Health Act, H.R. 4932 and S. 2741. Doing so would permit Medicare reimbursement for virtual visits regardless of originating site or geographic location. Patients experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 could gain greater access to physicians, physicians would be able to assess patients more quickly, and symptomatic patients would not be required to travel through the community to seek care in a manner that could contribute to community spread.

While we appreciate the CDC's efforts to keep the public and clinicians informed, ACP believes that there is an urgent need for the public and clinicians to have accurate and up-to-date and scientifically accurate information on the spread of COVID-19 in order to mitigate contagion, counter misinformation, and help clinicians effectively treat those at greatest risk. It is vital that our federal agencies and public health authorities recognize that health care professionals are at high risk of infection and addressing their personal protection needs are important in order to sustain the healthcare response for others. There is an urgent need to ensure adequate supplies of diagnostic testing equipment; personal protective equipment including gloves, masks, and gowns; dedicated respiratory support equipment and general care equipment for patients in isolation; isolation care facilities and functional beds; home isolation monitoring healthcare support workers; and social support systems that ensure the ability of health care professionals to present for clinical duties. In addition, there is urgent need to support the necessary scientific research that informs SARS-CoV-2 antiviral treatment strategies and vaccine development. ACP, for its part, has made evidence-based information available to its members, <https://www.acponline.org/clinical-information/clinical-resources-products/novel-coronavirus-information-for-internists>, including *Novel Coronavirus: A Physicians Guide*, <https://www.acponline.org/cme-moc/online-learning-center/novel-coronavirus-a-physicians-guide>, an online learning activity can be easily accessed on handheld devices and provides a clinical overview of infection control and patient care guidance.

ACP is supportive and appreciates that Medicare is now covering coronavirus testing when it is ordered by a physician or their clinical care teams.ⁱⁱ We also urge the administration to explore regulatory and other actions that would make COVID-19 testing free-of-charge to patients covered by both public and private insurance plans, including ACA-compliant plans offered through the insurance exchanges, and to waive co-pays and deductibles for patients seeing physicians for symptoms that may be indicative of COVID-19 or who are hospitalized for treatment.ⁱⁱⁱ ACP would be supportive of CMS utilizing a national disaster recovery program that would pay doctors 110% of Medicare rates for caring for uninsured patients who have been infected with SARS-CoV-2. There is growing concern that patients at risk will avoid being tested or seeing a physician if they will encounter substantial and often unaffordable out-of-pocket costs as a result.

ACP offers its assistance in partnering with HHS and the CDC to do everything possible to ensure the safety of patients in connection with COVID-19 and the physicians and other health care professionals who care for them. Please let us know how we can help.

Sincerely,



Robert M. McLean, MD, MACP
President

ⁱ 6 people have died from novel coronavirus in the US as cases nationwide surge, March 3, 2020.
<https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/02/health/us-coronavirus-cases-monday/index.html>

ⁱⁱ Medicare now covers coronavirus testing
<https://www.medicare.gov/blog/medicare-now-covers-coronavirus-testing>

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Weighs Paying Hospitals for Treating Uninsured Coronavirus Patients
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-administration-considering-paying-hospitals-for-treating-uninsured-coronavirus-patients-11583258943>