Statement of the American Society of Internal Medicine
May 12, 1997

I am Dr. Alan R. Nelson, executive vice president of the American Society of Internal Medicine (ASIM). On behalf of physicians who specialize in internal medicine, I am here today to express our strong support for the policies announced today by the American Association of Health Plans (AAHP) as part of its Putting Patients First initiative.

Policies and programs used by health plans to control costs and improve quality must support the ability of physicians to exercise professional judgment when it comes to the care of their patients. There is no substitute for the professional judgment of physicians, based on a physician’s training and experience, the scientific evidence and the knowledge of their patients’ individual circumstances. Rather than trying to dictate to physicians what care should be provided and how, AAHP’s new policies recognize the central role of physicians in directing the quality improvement and utilization review programs and establishing the practice guidelines and drug formularies of health plans.

During the past two years, ASIM has advocated changes in a number of health plan policies and procedures as part of our Reinventing Managed Care initiative. Our recommendations, which were outlined in a series of six policy papers, have been shared and discussed with AAHP and others. We are pleased that AAHP’s new policies incorporate many of our positions, including:

♦ Practice guidelines can help physicians make appropriate patient care decisions, provided that participating physicians are involved in their development; that the guidelines are based on the best, current scientific medical evidence available; that they are updated regularly; and that the guidelines are used to augment rather than supersede professional judgment.

♦ Utilization review programs should be based on current medical evidence; be directed by an experienced physician; involve participating physicians in program review; give physicians an opportunity to provide clinical information and a rationale for a course of treatment prior to a review determination; and provide for an exceptions process.

♦ Participating physicians should be consulted in developing and reviewing lists of approved prescription drugs, and there should be an exceptions process for coverage of drugs that are not on approved lists.

♦ Quality improvement programs should be directed by physicians, and should be designed and implemented with the involvement of participating physicians.

The industry-wide, standardized application form—which ASIM helped AAHP develop—also will ease hassles for physicians and lead to a fairer process for evaluating physician credentials.

The new policies AAHP announced today will help ensure that physicians are involved in all matters affecting clinical care. To put patients first in actual practice, physicians and health plans must demonstrate that we can work together as partners, not as antagonists, to provide appropriate and improved patient care. Today marks a major step toward accomplishing that mutual goal.

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