



May 6, 1998

The Honorable John D. Dingell
2328 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Representative Dingell:

On behalf of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), an organization representing more than 38,000 physicians dedicated to improving women's health care, I write to support your efforts to enact federally enforceable patient protections for managed care plans that will guarantee all consumers will have certain basic rights with respect to their health care. While many health plans in the country have adopted voluntarily these basic patient protections, we regret that many plans will choose not to adopt such protections. Therefore, federal legislation is necessary to guarantee that all consumers are protected.

One particular protection contained in S 1890 of importance to women is guaranteed access to their ob-gyns. It is critical that health plans allow a woman to choose a participating obstetrician-gynecologist as her primary care physician. In the event that a woman chooses a primary care provider of another specialty, the plan should allow her to directly access a plan ob-gyn for covered ob-gyn services without having to obtain prior authorization or a referral from her primary care physician. Your efforts will ensure that women receive appropriate care in a timely fashion. Despite the fact that a significant number of women view their ob-gyn as their primary care provider, many managed care plans restrict women's access to ob-gyns by requiring them to see a gatekeeper physician before allowing them to see an ob-gyn. This is a costly and time-consuming process that interferes with women seeking appropriate care.

Requiring health plans to allow women direct access to their ob-gyn is overwhelmingly supported by women and men. A January 1998 survey conducted by Harvard University and the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 82% of Americans support a federal law requiring direct access to ob-gyns. A significant majority of respondents (63%) continued to support such a law even if their health insurance premiums would increase. However, requiring health plans to allow women to directly access their ob-gyns will result in no significant increase in premiums. An April 1998 Coopers & Lybrand analysis found that allowing a woman to directly access her ob-gyn for routine and preventive care will raise an individual's health insurance premium by only 12 cents a year.

More than 30 states have enacted laws or regulations requiring health plans to allow women direct access to their ob-gyn. However, federal legislation is necessary to ensure that the many women whose health insurance plans are covered by the federal Employee Retirement Income Security Act also receive this important patient protection. This is but one example of how your legislation will benefit patients across the country. However, we must note that although we share a common goal we believe the ob-gyn access provisions in S 1890 require some modifications to achieve their intended purpose and we look forward to working with you on these provisions as the bill moves through the legislative process.

ACOG's goal is to enact bipartisan legislation that will establish minimum protections for all individuals enrolled in managed care plans to improve the quality of their care and we look forward to working with you to accomplish this important goal.

Sincerely,


Ralph W. Hale, MD
Executive Director

RWH/V/ss