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March 3, 2020

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
S-128 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nita Lowey
Chairwoman
House Committee on Appropriations
H-307 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Vice Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
S-128 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations
H-307 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Shelby, Senator Leahy, Representative Lowey, and Representative Granger:

On behalf of the physician and medical student members of the American Medical Association (AMA), I urge you, as leaders of the Senate and House Appropriations Committees, to move expeditiously to provide sufficient, comprehensive supplemental funding to address the emerging novel coronavirus (COVID-19) threat to our nation. As the number of confirmed cases of and deaths due to COVID-19 has risen in recent days in the U.S., America's physicians are on the frontlines diagnosing, counseling, and treating patients in their private offices, hospitals, clinics, community health centers, long-term care facilities, and other health care settings. In conjunction with the government, media, and health officials, physicians also play a critical role in providing evidence-based information to patients and the public about the possible threats posed by this new virus and steps to take to prevent contracting and/or spreading it, as well as allaying fear and misinformation. Resources, including rapid diagnostics and personal protective equipment, particularly in hospitals and other facilities that are experiencing outbreaks or hotspots of COVID-19 must be rapidly available to contain the spread of this new virus and ensure that physicians and the public health community can respond to it promptly.

As you develop the COVID-19 supplemental funding package, the AMA also urges you to include provisions to lift Medicare restrictions on the use of telehealth. If COVID-19 spreads further, patients may experience barriers to accessing care, including appointments with their physicians or for services such as lab tests, X-rays, oncology treatments, etc. Expanded telehealth capability may be needed to ensure that patients can access appropriate care in their homes or residential facilities if social distancing measures are implemented to prevent or reduce virus transmission. Under current Medicare law, there are several restrictions that prevent easy access by patients to telehealth, including originating site and geographic restrictions. Therefore, the AMA urges that these restrictions be specifically waived by including language in the supplemental funding from section 9 of the CONNECT for Health Act (S. 2741/H.R. 4932), which would allow the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services to waive certain requirements for payment of telehealth services during national emergencies.

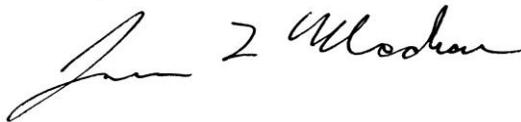
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The AMA also urges that language be added to the funding package to ensure that Medicare (Part B) can provide coverage to future vaccines for COVID-19. This would ensure that Medicare beneficiaries can be immunized at no cost to them. Moreover, it is important to include funding for uninsured and underinsured patients who otherwise might avoid seeking care due to the inability to afford treatment. Almost half of U.S. adults aged 19 to 64 have inadequate insurance, especially in traditionally vulnerable populations. As our nation confronts the threat posed by this new coronavirus, we must ensure that we do not reinforce existing health inequities.

Furthermore, we recognize the critical role that governmental public health agencies play in working with physicians and other health care providers to respond to this epidemic. It is critical that our nation's public health agencies have adequate funding to implement quarantines, conduct testing and monitoring of patients under investigation, ensure laboratory capacity for rapid diagnosis, and conduct public health surveillance activities to track the outbreak and inform response. All efforts must be sufficiently funded in order to be successful in preparing, responding to and controlling this infectious disease outbreak. We also urge that supplemental funding not be offset by cutting other public health programs.

The AMA appreciates your leadership in addressing this novel threat, and we look forward to working with you to ensure that the supplemental funding package is as robust as necessary to ensure that health care and public health systems have the resources necessary to protect patients, physicians and other health care providers, and the nation's health.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James L. Madara". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "M".

James L. Madara, MD