September 20, 2011

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Co-Chair, Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction  
448 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jeb Hensarling  
Co-Chair, Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction  
129 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Murray, Representative Hensarling, and Members of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction;

The American Academy of Neurology (AAN), an association of more than 24,000 neurologists and neuroscience professionals dedicated to providing the best possible care for patients with neurological conditions, encourages the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction to replace the irreparably broken Medicare Sustainable Growth Rate (SGR) formula with a system that more accurately recognizes the value of non-procedural care and ensures that Medicare beneficiaries’ have adequate access to cognitive specialists like neurologists.

Neurologists provide higher quality of care to patients with neurological disorders like dementia, Parkinson’s, epilepsy, stroke, and migraine than other physicians. Where studied, care by a neurologist reduced costs and improved outcomes. Patients who receive care from neurologists often are discharged earlier from the hospital, receive more accurate diagnoses, and receive fewer unnecessary tests and procedures. For example, stroke patients have a lower mortality rate, and less disability when treated by a neurologist.

Although the gap in median income between primary care physicians and specialists is well publicized, a recent review of Medicare data demonstrates that the disparity is actually between procedural vs. nonprocedural physicians. Health care policy discussions focused on this gap currently pit primary care physicians against all specialists. However, a number of specialists are also nonprocedural in that they derive the bulk of their income from evaluation and management. Nonprocedural specialties like neurology are experiencing the same economic disadvantages as primary care, with the resulting difficulty in attracting graduating US medical students into the specialty, yet current
congressional efforts to address these disparities have thus far focused only on primary care.

A prime example of the misunderstanding of the services that cognitive care specialists provide is the recent indication that MedPAC may recommend Medicare payments be frozen for primary care providers for 10 years and cut 5.9 percent for all other specialists for three years, followed by a freeze for seven years. Including neurology and other cognitive care providers in the group of specialists makes little sense as much of these physicians’ services and billing codes (evaluation and management codes) are identical to those of primary care providers. The cut suggested would fall on cognitive care providers simply because of their specialty designation rather than the services they provide and would result in serious ramifications to patients who are often the highest-cost, highest-need Medicare beneficiaries.

The MedPAC proposal directly conflicts with the need for change recognized in the June 2011 MedPAC report that cited an opportunity to make needed alternations to the physician fee schedule by replacing the SGR formula with a new payment structure. MedPAC suggested the need to:

> Realign payments for physician and other health professionals to help ensure an adequate supply of practitioners in cognitive (nonprocedural) specialties who focus on managing patients with chronic conditions.

The AAN wholeheartedly agrees that payments must be realigned so that an adequate supply of neurologists and other cognitive specialists can be maintained to treat the growing patient populations that have complex chronic and acute conditions which require medical expertise beyond primary care.

It is clear that in order to control costs and ensure an appropriate mix of physicians for all Medicare beneficiaries, fundamental changes in the health care delivery system must occur. We urge you to repeal the flawed SGR formula and replace it with a system that will ensure patient access to neurologists and other cognitive specialists now and in the future.

Sincerely,

Bruce Sigsbee, MD, FAAN
President, American Academy of Neurology

Identical letter sent to:
The Honorable Max Baucus
The Honorable John Kerry
The Honorable Jon Kyl
The Honorable Rob Portman
The Honorable Pat Toomey
The Honorable Xavier Becerra
The Honorable Dave Camp
The Honorable James Clyburn
The Honorable Fred Upton
The Honorable Chris Van Hollen

cc: The Honorable John Boehner
    The Honorable Harry Reid
    The Honorable Eric Cantor
    The Honorable Steny Hoyer
    The Honorable Mitch McConnell
    The Honorable Nancy Pelosi