Preserving Patient Access to Neurologists

Background
There is wide consensus that primary care is facing a crisis. Though neurology is a distinct specialty, many of the factors behind the primary care crisis are also faced by neurologists.

Like primary care physicians, the majority of a neurologist’s practice consists of spending time with patients. It takes significant time and skill to provide ongoing cognitive care to manage complex chronic conditions for people with neurologic diseases like ALS, Alzheimer’s, multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, traumatic brain injury, Parkinson’s disease, headache, and stroke. These diseases often represent the highest need, highest cost Medicare beneficiaries, making access to neurologic care all the more critical as the US population ages.

Problem
Current health reform proposals increase E/M payments to primary care and other cognitive specialty physicians but exclude neurology.

Current proposals would create a “primary care incentive” for physicians who bill more than 50% (60% in Senate) of their total services under evaluation and management (E/M) codes. Physicians meeting that threshold are eligible to participate if they are: family medicine, internal medicine, geriatric medicine, and pediatric medicine. On average, neurologists provide more than 60% of their services in the form of face-to-face, E/M billed care for patients. This leaves neurology as the ONLY specialty that meets the billing requirements but is excluded from eligibility for this bonus.

Consequences
Primary care physicians often have limited or no neurology training. If the proposed incentive were to exclude neurology, there would be an even greater disincentive for US medical students to enter neurology at a time when more people will develop neurologic disease. This will lead to less access to appropriate physician care for Medicare beneficiaries with complex chronic neurological conditions.

Legislative Solution
• Payment reform and incentives are needed to ensure that the critical services that neurologists and other cognitive care physicians provide are protected.
• Neurology should be included in any Medicare primary care bonus program

Support
As the attached letter shows, including neurology in the primary care incentive is also supported by many national patient support organizations.