

August 17, 2001

Senate Appropriations Committee Members
Senate LHHS Subcommittee Members
House Appropriations Committee Members
House LHHS Subcommittee Members

Dear Appropriator:

As a health care provider, I am writing to urge you to support a Nationwide Health Tracking Network to track chronic diseases and associated environmental factors. Our country does not nationally coordinate tracking of chronic diseases even though chronic diseases – cancer, asthma, diabetes, and Parkinson’s – are responsible for 70% of all deaths in America and cost citizens and government \$325 billion annually.

As a nation, we responded quickly to the threat of West Nile virus by tracking and monitoring every report of infected birds and people, but our health officers cannot answer the question of when and where chronic diseases strike.

Here are some startling facts:

- More than half the states (27) lack ongoing tracking and monitoring of asthma even though limited studies have shown that the disease has increased 75% between 1980 and 1994.
- Most states fail to track developmental disabilities such as autism and mental retardation despite an estimated 50 percent rise nationwide in these disabilities in the last decade, and research indicating that 25 percent are related to environmental exposures.
- Only four states reported tracking autoimmune diseases such as lupus even though rates for these diseases are rising.
- Birth defect registries cover less than half the nation’s population even though birth defects are the leading cause of infant mortality in America.

A nationwide health tracking network would collect vital information on when and where chronic diseases occur. It would also track Americans’ exposures to potentially related environmental factors through tools like biomonitoring, used to create the national exposure report released this spring by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC would establish uniform data standards and coordinate local, state, and federal data. In addition to collecting tracking data, the Network would provide resources to create rapid response teams to quickly respond to disease clusters and other health emergencies. The Network would also establish early warning systems to identify environmental health threats like pesticides, lead and mercury poisonings.

The CDC has already begun to explore the development of a coordinated nationwide health tracking network among all states, building on existing systems for tracking infectious disease. The CDC’s report is expected out this summer.

We request that the Committee provide an increase of \$60 million in the CDC’s appropriations for Fiscal Year 2002 for a first year of work in creating a nationwide health tracking network. With these resources, CDC can establish ten model programs in states as a first step in the development of a nationwide health tracking network. The model projects would include support for state and local health departments to develop and operate a comprehensive and coordinated state health tracking network, regional environmental health laboratories, and state environmental health investigators and chronic disease epidemiologists to inform and support rapid response teams when a disease cluster or other health emergency is detected. In addition, these funds would enable CDC, working in coordination with state and local public health officers and environmental health

specialists, to begin developing data standards and tracking protocols to ensure that the data collected by states would be nationally comparable.

This initial investment toward strengthening our country's ability to prevent chronic disease will make a meaningful difference in addressing health threats and potentially related environmental factors. I hope you will support this important program.

Sincerely,

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