

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 30, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Leader McCarthy,

As Congress continues to respond to the needs facing our country as a result of the current COVID-19 pandemic, we write to express our concerns regarding the ability of cancer patients to access the medications they need in a safe setting during this crisis. We urge House leadership to carefully consider the unique needs of this vulnerable population and take steps in subsequent COVID-19 relief packages to ensure cancer medications, particularly oral medications, are accessible and affordable for patients.

Cancer is a relentless disease that impacts millions of Americans. Just this year more than 1.8 million people in the US are expected to be diagnosed with cancer, and over 600,000 Americans will die from the disease.¹ Cancer not only impacts individuals and families across the country, but it also costs our economy several hundred billion dollars annually in direct treatment costs and lost productivity.

Because those with compromised immune systems are at a higher risk for contracting COVID-19, people with cancer are particularly vulnerable at this time. Early estimates show that the mortality rate for cancer patients who contract the virus is around 6 percent, nearly seven times higher than that for patients with no underlying medical conditions.² For the millions of cancer patients who receive intravenous (IV) cancer treatment in a health care setting, leaving their homes to access treatment during this pandemic is neither feasible nor safe. Under the appropriate consultation of a medical professional, updating a patient's treatment plan to include an oral medication would allow cancer patients to stay at home, reducing an individual's risk of contracting COVID-19 and minimizing any further stress on hospitals involved in treating immunocompromised cancer patients with COVID-19.

Despite the fact that oral chemotherapy is popular with both patients and oncologists, insurance coverage for cancer treatments has not kept up with some of the most promising oncology research. Consequently, some cancer patients lack access to potentially lifesaving oral therapies. While IV treatments are usually covered under a plan's medical benefit component, orally-administered anti-cancer medications are covered under a plan's prescription drug component, which often requires a higher percentage of cost-sharing for the patient. This considerable

¹ American Cancer Society, "Cancer Statistics Center." Online at <https://cancerstatisticscenter.cancer.org/#/>.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Interim Clinical Guidance for Management of Patients with Confirmed Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)." Online at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/clinical-guidance-management-patients.html>.

disparity in coverage can force cancer patients to make difficult decisions regarding their care based on the potentially outdated guidelines of their health insurance policy, rather than the advice of their doctor. Studies have consistently shown that, when faced with high co-pays for orally administered anti-cancer drugs, some patients choose to simply not fill a prescription.

One potential solution to address this disparity is H.R. 1730, the *Cancer Drug Parity Act*, a bill that would require all payers to offer oral cancer medications with the same cost-sharing as IV cancer treatments. With 129 cosponsors in the House and 17 cosponsors in the Senate, this bill has garnered strong bipartisan, bicameral support. Ensuring parity in coverage as a part of a subsequent COVID-19 relief package – even on a temporary basis – as the *Cancer Drug Parity Act* does would both increase access to life-saving treatments and improve the quality of life for cancer patients.

Access to affordable oral anti-cancer medications is a critical need amongst cancer patients during the COVID-19 public health emergency. We recognize and appreciate recent steps taken by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to expand the home infusion benefits to give Medicare beneficiaries home access to treatments normally administered in a health care facility. However, we are concerned that home infusion may not be an appropriate solution for all cancer patients during this crisis. Although home infusion can deliver safe and effective treatment for patients across many disease areas, it can pose a number of hazards for cancer patients. Many IV anti-cancer drugs can carry significant safety risks, and patients should be closely monitored while treatment is administered in order to identify and mitigate any potentially deadly adverse reactions that may arise. Similarly, although we are supportive of recent actions both Congress and CMS have taken to increase access to telehealth as a response to COVID-19, the risks and complexity involved in infusing IV anti-cancer drugs do not allow for telehealth to be a feasible option for treatment delivery.

Therefore, it is more important than ever that cancer patients are able to access oral anti-cancer medications that they can take at home. No cancer patient should be forced to choose between a costly oral medication or potentially risking their health and safety to receive IV treatment. Thank you for your attention to this important issue, and we look forward to continuing to work with you to respond to the unprecedented COVID-19 public health crisis.

Sincerely,



Brian Higgins
Member of Congress



Brett Guthrie
Member of Congress



Doris Matsui
Member of Congress



Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress