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September 4, 2014

Dear Medical Director:

On behalf of the 62,000 members of the American Academy of Pediatrics, I am writing to urge that all of your health plans provide comprehensive benefits coverage for pediatric mental health. The AAP is committed to the optimal physical, mental, and social health and well-being for all infants, children, adolescents, and young adults and advocates that mental health care is a basic need of children and adolescents. Comprehensive benefits coverage will enhance access to pediatric mental health care. Effective financing systems for children's mental health are essential in building a successful comprehensive system of care.

However, numerous challenges and barriers impact not only financing and service delivery systems but also children's access to mental health services. These issues include:

- Limitations on coverage for mental health services in public and private health insurance systems
- Inadequate payment for mental health services, including preventive services, to primary care clinicians, mental health professionals, and other key professionals
- Billing and coding rules and regulations that impede the provision of mental health services by primary care clinicians and other types of clinicians
- Behavioral and mental health care carve-outs in health plans that limit the ability of primary care clinicians to identify mental health conditions early and make direct referrals for mental health services, thereby creating access barriers to services for children and their families
- Lack of payment for case management and care coordination efforts
- Other restrictions that limit the ability of primary care clinicians to adequately address mental health needs in children

The nationwide shortage of children's mental health professionals contributes to the urgency of enhancing mental health services in primary care settings. Without intervention, child and adolescent psychiatric disorders are often identified only when serious and frequently continue into adulthood, further escalating medical costs, negatively affecting educational attainment and employment opportunities, and increasing the risk of poverty. It is in the best interest of payers, as well as children and families, to improve the mental health of children and adolescents.

Pediatric primary care offers a setting that encourages trusting, longitudinal relationships with the child and family often referred to as the "primary care advantage." The pediatric

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primary care advantage recognizes that pediatricians have unique opportunities to affect the mental health of children: preventing mental health problems by guiding parents in behavior management; identifying mental health symptoms as they emerge, intervening early, before symptoms have evolved into disorders; providing treatment for more common mental health conditions; facilitating referral of children and their family members when mental health or substance abuse specialty services are needed; collaborating with child and adolescent psychiatrists in caring for children with severely impairing mental health and substance abuse disorders; and coordinating the primary and specialty care of children with mental health conditions and substance abuse, as they do for children with other special health care needs.

The attached *Call to Action* document recommends steps payers can take toward increasing access to mental healthcare for children and adolescents through improved support of mental health services in the primary care and specialty settings and improving coordination of services between primary care and mental health care systems.

Examples of health plan policy changes that carriers are urged to implement include:

- Provide benefits coverage and payment for mental health services including those provided by pediatricians. Also, expand the number of mental health visits with a provisional diagnosis (or diagnoses) that can be paid under the health plan.
- Establish parity between medical services and mental health services in benefit plan design.
- Expand and align provider network and empanel pediatricians as part of the mental health provider network.
- Provide appropriate payment and ensure that key primary care clinicians and mental health professionals (eg, licensed clinical psychologists and social workers, and nurses with specialized psychiatric training) are eligible to receive payment for assessment and treatment services.
- Support integrated models of care within the family-and-patient centered medical home.
- Incentivizing a standard of mental health practice that requires exchange of information between mental health professionals and primary care clinicians including non-face to face care, team-delivered care and team meetings.

Adoption of these strategies by payers and health plans will enhance the value of member benefits coverage and increase access to necessary and effective mental health services.

For additional information please contact, Louis A. Terranova, MHA, Senior Health Policy Analyst, AAP Department of Practice at lterranova@aap.org or 847/434-7633.

I look forward to your response for implementing these recommendations.

Sincerely,

James M. Perrin, MD, FAAP
President