

STATEMENT

OCTOBER 21, 2009

COALITION TO PROTECT PATIENTS' RIGHTS

PRESS CONFERENCE

M. TODD WILLIAMSON, M.D.

Good morning. I have the great privilege of speaking to you on behalf of the Medical Association of Georgia, as well as a coalition of eight state and national specialty societies representing nearly 50,000 physicians.

Our country seems to be asking, "What do physicians think of the health reform bill?" I am here today to answer this question on behalf of thousands of practicing physicians from all across America who treat patients in their offices every day. These physicians, who are on the front line of patient care, reject the idea that increased government involvement in the delivery of health care is good for doctors and our patients.

In a recent survey of physician leaders in Georgia, **79** percent said “**no**” to a public option, and **72** percent said “no” to an individual mandate that would **require** every man, woman and child to have a government-approved insurance plan. Such requirements would put the government in control of **all** of our health care dollars and would put bureaucrats between **every** individual patient and their physician.

Make no mistake, the bills before us are bad for patients. Two days ago, I was discussing treatment options with one of my patients. The 63-year-old man said, “We had better take care of my problem now.” When I told him his condition did not require immediate treatment, he said, “I have great insurance, but in two years, I lose it because I have to go on Medicare. Let’s take care of it now.” You see, the government option has become the **only** option for our Medicare patients, whether they like it or not, and the government’s so-called “public option” will become the only option for every patient.

I am here today to tell you that we believe our patients should **always** be able to spend their own money on

their medical care. As we speak today, this fundamental right is restricted in the Medicare program, as well as in the bills that are being considered in Congress. Our patients should be able to **own and control** their health insurance, and pay for it with tax-free dollars. Our patients should be able to keep their policies regardless of their employment status; insurance should **not** be tied to one's job. Employer mandates to provide insurance would only exacerbate this problem.

We need to reform our broken payment system, but a hurried approach that fails to protect the patient-physician relationship is not the answer. There is no place for big government in our exam rooms. We want to return medical decision-making to its rightful place – in the hands of patients, with their physician as trusted advisor.

You may have heard about the imminent vote in the U.S. Senate that addresses the Medicare payment formula. There is broad agreement among members of Congress that this formula, known as the **sustainable growth rate**, is fatally flawed and has not worked since it was adopted in 1998. And yet, in every year since 2000, our

government has not had the political will to address its fundamental flaws. This government inaction has created a crisis for seniors that **has** to be addressed within the next 10 weeks to prevent a 21.5 percent reduction in payments to physicians on January 1, 2010.

If these cuts occur, our seniors will face an unprecedented **loss of access** to medical care. Doctors will be unable to continue to treat seniors when payment rates are set below the cost of providing the care they were promised. Our government has failed its most vulnerable citizens by promising access to care that it has been historically reluctant to fund. And this is in the context of Medicare's projected bankruptcy in less than 10 years.

So what has the Senate proposed to do to fix this problem? It proposes to eliminate the accumulated cuts and freeze physician payment rates indefinitely. It was reported yesterday that, in exchange for doing what should have been done years ago, Senate leaders have asked the doctors of America to abandon our call for reasonable and proven tort reform measures, despite the fact that the Congressional Budget Office has determined

tort reform will save Americans \$54 billion over 10 years. It is reported that in exchange for addressing this flawed formula, Senators have asked the doctors of America to promote the health reform bill that is currently making its way through Congress.

Our coalition has made known our principles for healing our broken payment system, and we will not compromise on our patients' care. We are not willing to say that we will "go along" with a government-run health care system, or any system that places the government or private insurance companies between **us** and **our patients**. We are not willing to cast aside our policy positions or our belief that true savings can be achieved by reducing defensive medicine through meaningful tort reform. Simply put, we are not willing to compromise the fundamental principles of our profession. The bills before Congress take medicine, our profession, and our patients down the wrong road.

Finally, I am here today to ask for your help. Ask your member of Congress to **start over**. Start over with a bill that will protect the patient-physician relationship. Start over with a bill that will protect your right to see the

doctor of your choice. And start over with a bill that will allow you to spend your health care dollars the way you think best.

Thank you.