

# News RELEASE

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## **APA Lauds Legislation to End Discriminatory Mental Illness Coverage of Elderly**

Arlington, Va. – The American Psychiatric Association (APA) hailed legislation to end Medicare's long-standing discriminatory 50 percent copayment requirement for outpatient mental health services, introduced today by U.S. Senators Olympia Snowe (R-ME) and John Kerry (D-MA).

The bill, The Medicare Mental Health Copayment Equity Act of 2003, would require Medicare patients being treated for mental illness to pay only the same 20 percent copayment charged for all other medical treatment instead of the 50 percent copayment now required by law.

"This legislation helps fulfill APA's historic efforts to end Medicare's discriminatory outpatient coverage of treatment for mental illness. It gets us where we need to go in a way that is fully responsive to the needs of Medicare beneficiaries while being fiscally responsible given Medicare's budget picture," said APA President Paul S. Appelbaum, M.D. "It's a creative approach to problem solving that amply warrants our thanks and strong support."

"The current Medicare system imposes a policy of discrimination by diagnosis that inflicts a heavy toll on Medicare patients who, by no fault of their own, happen to suffer from mental illness. This is a shameful policy to have written into Federal law," said Dr. Appelbaum. "This legislation would end this statutory discrimination by requiring that Medicare patients pay only the same 20 percent copayment for mental illness treatment that they pay when seeking any other medical treatment, including, for example, treatment for diabetes, cancer, heart disease, or the common cold."

Mental illness is a major health problem for the country's Medicare population. According to a U.S. Surgeon General report, up to 20 percent of older adults in the U.S. and nearly 40 percent of older adults in primary care settings experience symptoms of depression.

Likewise, older people have the highest rate of suicide in the country, and the risk of suicide increases with age. Substantial numbers of disabled individuals qualify for Medicare by virtue of their long-term disability. Of those, the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill reports that some 400,000 non-elderly disabled Medicare beneficiaries become eligible by virtue of mental disorders. These are typically individuals with the severe and persistent mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia.

"Medicare's intrinsic discrimination adversely affects the elderly and disabled by increasing their cost of care and creating major financial disincentives for them to seek care when needed," said Dr. Appelbaum. "All we are asking is that Medicare treat patients with mental illness just like any other patients. APA commends Senators Snowe and Kerry for their tireless dedication to ending discrimination against persons struggling with mental illness. We pledge to work with them and all Members of Congress to see that this landmark bill becomes our national law."

**The American Psychiatric Association is a national medical specialty society, founded in 1844, whose 35,000 physician members specialize in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illnesses and substance use disorders. For more information, visit the APA Web site at [www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org).**

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