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Patients, Physicians and State Legislators Call On Congress to Get Better Access To Lifesaving “Immune System in a Bag”

SACRAMENTO—Patients, Medical Professionals and State Legislators today called upon Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and the rest of the California Congressional Delegation to improve access to the human plasma product, intravenous immune globulin (IVIG), which thousands of patients depend on. The product prevents life-threatening infections and paralysis associated with certain chronic diseases, but suffers from low and no reimbursement by Medicare and private insurance.

Assemblymember Mary Hayashi, Assistant Majority Whip, was joined by Senator Leland Yee, Assistant President Pro Tem, as well as other health care advocates at a news conference today at the state capitol.

Eight people in the country, including one in California, have died because they couldn't get this product. The treatment costs \$2,200 to \$7,700 per infusion, depending on the patient's diagnosis.

“The cost of IVIG has risen, while reimbursement has been dramatically lowered by Medicare. We are seriously considering denial of this vital therapy to Medicare patients,” said Joan Nasr, RN, of California Allergy & Asthma Medical Group in Los Angeles. “They would be referred to a hospital for outpatient treatment and subsequently be exposed to a variety of pathogens while in a compromised immune state. Many would simply not go at all. Either way, many would probably succumb to pneumonia and other illnesses requiring lengthy hospital stays and extensive treatment and possible disability.”

Because private insurers tend to follow Medicare on reimbursement for medical treatment, private insurers have begun to deny or greatly reduce payment for the therapy, explained Dominick Spatafora, president of the Neuropathy Action Foundation and patient on IVIG therapy. Coverage is sometimes denied by insurers who claim the treatment or dosing does not fall within standards established by Medicare or an insurance company. "The crisis now affects the countless thousands of people across the United States who rely on this human plasma product to remain active, contributing members of their communities.

IVIG is manufactured from human plasma, pooled from thousands of donors. It is used to treat immune deficiency and autoimmune diseases, as well as neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis, neuropathy, myositis, and Myasthenia Gravis.