October 26, 2020

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley, Chairman
Committee on Finance
United States Senate
219 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Ron Wyden, Ranking Member
Committee on Finance
United States Senate
219 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Frank Pallone, Chairman
Committee on Energy and Commerce
United States House of Representatives
2125 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Greg Walden, Ranking Member
Committee on Energy and Commerce
United States House of Representatives
2322 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Richard Neal, Chairman
Committee on Ways and Means
United States House of Representatives
1102 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kevin Brady, Ranking Member
Committee on Ways and Means
United States House of Representatives
1139 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Stopping the Application of Sequestration to Medicare Payments in 2021

Dear Chairmen Grassley, Pallone, and Neal and Ranking Members Wyden, Walden, and Brady:

We are writing this very important letter on behalf of the Board of Directors of the Community Oncology Alliance (COA), an organization representing community oncology practices that treat the majority (more than half) of all Americans with cancer. We applaud the decision of Congress to stop the application of sequestration to Medicare payments through December 31, 2020. We now request that you stop sequestration for an additional year through December 31, 2021. This can be done in a budget neutral way by “paying” for this sequester stop by extending sequestration for an additional year on the backend of the scoring window.

We make this request to stop application of sequestration to Medicare payments for 2021 because community oncology practices have been under enormous financial pressures during this pandemic. As hospitals were overrun with COVID-19 cases, community oncology practices kept their doors open to treat Americans with cancer. However, this required complete retooling of “normal time” clinical operations, with clinical and operational processes taking longer, being more complex, and being much more expensive, as a result of lower productivity and additional safety measures required, such as personal protective equipment. Social distancing, which is critically important for immunocompromised patients with cancer, has resulted in higher costs to implement and lower productivity.

Unfortunately, practices have not been able to hit the pause button on cancer during the pandemic. As documented by a just-released study, to which we are coauthors, cancer screenings, biopsies, and treatment have all seen sharp decreases during the early stages of this public health emergency.
As oncologist Dr. Debra Patt, lead author of the study was quoted, “When cancer becomes more advanced before it is detected, it becomes a ticking time bomb. The decrease in screenings, diagnosis, and treatments this year will lead to later stage cancers for patients, increasing morbidity and mortality for years to come. We need to detect cancers and stop them before it is too late. We need to alert all patients that they need to stop medical distancing and get appropriate screening and health care.”

Now, we are facing a third wave of COVID-19 at the same time the flu season is upon us. With this, we are very concerned about further delays in diagnostic procedures and treatment of cancer. We are already seeing more advanced cancers, which lead to poorer outcomes, higher costs, and increased mortality. Additionally, the financial pressures may become even more severe as practices brace to keep their facilities and providers COVID-19 free so they can treat their patients in a safe environment. Again, this is even more financial pressure.

Please help community oncology practices stay open to treat Americans with cancer during this pandemic, which, unfortunately, we expect to run well into 2021 until mass quantities of vaccines are available and distributed. **We implore you to stop the application of sequestration to Medicare payments throughout 2021.** This will at least provide some financial relief to the financial and other challenges community oncology practices will face in 2021.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Michael Diaz, MD
President

Ted Okon
Executive Director

CC: Donald J. Trump, President of the United States
    Alex Azar, Secretary of Health and Human Services
    Seema Verma, Administrator, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services