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April 7, 2020

The Honorable Cindy Hyde-Smith
United States Senator
113 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Hyde-Smith:

I am writing you on behalf of the 1,333 family physicians, residents and medical students across the state of Mississippi with an urgent need that will help us take care of our patients during the current COVID-19 pandemic. We are thankful that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services as well as multiple private payors have relaxed many of the restrictions on telehealth services as stopgap measures to allow for care of non-emergent and routine healthcare issues without the need for a face-to-face encounter. These allowances provide for the use of non-standard methods of communication such as Facetime, Skype, and Zoom or other internet conference call/webinar meeting technology. While these are very helpful, unfortunately in Mississippi it may not be enough. I am writing to ask that you specifically advocate for the ability to use telephone only visits for the majority of encounters, specifically those covered by a 99213, 99214, 99202, or 99203 CPT Code.

First, the lack of reliable internet or WIFI connectivity in the Mississippi Delta and other more rural parts of the state make this difficult for many patients to utilize. Without a reliable WIFI connection in their home or cellular data plans these patients are asked to go to a family member's home or a public location that is offering WIFI. This puts our most vulnerable citizens traveling, interacting with others, and risking exposure of which defeats the purpose of telehealth in the first place. The State of Mississippi acknowledged this problem in legislative efforts to improve rural internet access in recent years, but these will be years in the making and we need help now.

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MISSION: Supporting Family Medicine physicians as they improve the health of all Mississippians.

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Second, we care for a population with unique challenges. Many of our older patients are uncomfortable with technology, often relying on younger family members to assist with Facetime or Skype sessions. Others are under-educated and unfamiliar with technology to the level that would be needed to safely conduct telehealth in those settings. Both of these challenges cannot be solved in the short term and are limiting our access to patients.

To address these issues, physicians need to be able to conduct telephone visits for the most common visit levels (CPT codes 99213, 99214, 99202 and 99203.) We ask this only as a stopgap measure during this pandemic, and first and foremost as a measure to help us provide for our patients during this era of unique healthcare challenges.

Thank you for your consideration of our requests.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "William M. Grantham MD".

William M. Grantham, MD-
President

On behalf of MAFP Board of Directors