On May 4, the U.S. House voted 217-213 to approve a bill to repeal and replace Obamacare/the Affordable Care Act. The U.S. Senate is now considering its own approach to a health law overhaul which, upon approval, would be merged with the House bill for final consideration in both chambers.

Doctors of Optometry—physician-level primary care providers serving communities across the country—are a key point of access to health care systems for tens of millions of Americans. Through the delivery of personalized care and comprehensive eye exams, doctors of optometry assure precise and healthy vision, identify and treat glaucoma and serious infections and ensure early diagnosis of immediate threats to overall health, including hypertension, stroke and diabetes, which may have no obvious signs or symptoms.

The AOA is urging Senators to fully recognize Optometry’s essential and expanding role in the health care system, and include specific provisions in the Senate’s emerging health care bill that will safeguard patient choice, strengthen the doctor-patient relationship, outlaw anti-competitive abuses by health plans, and prioritize the delivery of lifesaving and sight saving frontline eye health care.

The AOA supports inclusion of the following key provisions within Obamacare repeal and replace legislation: the Dental and Optometric Care Access Act (HR 1606), to address abusive practices in the vision and dental coverage markets (pending before the House Energy and Commerce Committee); the Competitive Health Insurance Reform Act (HR 372), to repeal the health insurance industry’s antitrust exemption (approved by the House, 416-7 on March 22); and House-passed language recognizing preventive eye health and vision care under state transition and stability funding.

Doctors of Optometry are independent primary health care providers who examine, diagnose, treat, and manage diseases and disorders of the visual system, the eye, and associated structures as well as diagnose related systemic conditions. Optometrists provide more than two-thirds of the primary eye care services in the United States, often through practices that provide care to patients in infancy and early childhood as well as school-aged children, working adults and older Americans. Doctors of Optometry are more widely distributed geographically than other eye care providers, and are recognized as a key entry point into the health care system. In fact, according to AOA estimates, Doctors of Optometry practice in more than 7,000 communities across the United States, serving as the sole primary eye care provider in more than 4,300 communities.

Regular comprehensive eye exams performed by Doctors of Optometry are an important part of cost-saving preventive health care. Many eye and vision problems have no obvious sign or symptom. As a result, individual are often unaware that problems exist. Early diagnosis and treatment are important for maintaining good vision and eye health, and when possible, preventing vision loss. Additionally, asymptomatic comprehensive eye exams play a leading role in helping to reveal many undiagnosed systemic diseases, such as certain types of cancers, brain diseases, heart diseases, diabetes, and hypertension. Many systemic diseases are detectable through a comprehensive eye exam when the patient’s eyes are dilated to allow the eye doctor to examine the blood vessels in the eye directly.

Today, more than 25 million children and adults in the United States have diabetes and an estimated 68 million adults have hypertension. Both diabetes and hypertension are detectable through a comprehensive eye exam performed in-person and by an eye doctor. Early detection of diabetes and hypertension can ultimately reduce the enormous financial burden that these diseases place on employer resources and our wider health care system. High blood pressure last year alone was projected to cost the United States $93.5 billion in health services, medications, and missed days of work. The total cost of undiagnosed diabetes in the U.S. last year was $174 billion for direct medical costs and $58 billion for indirect costs related to disability, work loss, and premature mortality. These two diseases and others are having a significant impact on the American public and on the bottom line for our nation’s businesses. A preventive eye exam performed in-person and by an eye doctor can help address these rising costs head-on.
Health Care Reform Update

The AOA and its member doctors and students have long been a resource for Congress and administration officials on health care policy issues. With the U.S. Senate now considering legislation to follow-up on the House-passed American Health Care Act, the AOA is urging senators to fully recognize Optometry’s essential and expanding role in the health care system, and to include in their bill specific provisions designed to safeguard patient choice, strengthen the doctor-patient relationship, outlaw anti-competitive abuses by health plans and prioritize the delivery of lifesaving and sight saving frontline eye health care:

Stop Vision Plan Abuses—The AOA and the American Dental Association support the bipartisan Dental and Optometric Care Access Act (H.R. 1606) to end anti-competitive, anti-patient abuses in the vision and dental coverage market, including harmful non-covered service requirements on doctors, unfair contractual linkage between vision and health plans, and elimination of the choice of labs that’s important to doctors and patients. A 2016 report issued by Avalon Health Economics recognized the market dominance and control of a handful of vertically-integrated mega-plans, and stated that their policies are “designed to transfer operating margins from providers to plans without benefiting consumers.” Although 41 states have so far enacted laws aimed at putting a stop to abuses, the lack of Federal action is allowing abuses to persist for plans regulated at the federal-level. HR 1606 provides the crackdown that’s needed without pre-empting any state’s law.

Repeal of the Health Insurance Industry’s Antitrust Exemption—the AOA supports the Competitive Health Insurance Reform Act (H.R 372), as approved by the House 416-7 on March 22, to encourage competition that will produce improved, more accessible, and more affordable coverage. The Competitive Health Insurance Reform Act would repeal the antitrust exemption that the health insurance industry has had under the McCarran-Ferguson Act since 1945 and authorize the Federal Trade Commission and the Justice Department to enforce the federal antitrust laws against health insurance companies engaged in anticompetitive conduct. HR 372 is crafted to ensure that there will be no interference with state authority over insurance regulations, antitrust statutes, and consumer protection laws, and applies only to the business of health insurance without any impact on life insurance, property or casualty insurance or other insurance areas.

Preventive Eye and Vision Care as a Centerpiece of Patient and State Stability Funding—The American Health Care Act, as passed by the U.S. House on May 4, included a Patient and State Stability Fund that prioritizes access to preventive and medically necessary eye health and vision care. The AOA urges the Senate to also prioritize cost-effective preventive eye health care services.

U.S. SENATORS ARE URGED TO INCLUDE IN OBAMACARE REPEAL/REPLACE:

- THE DENTAL AND OPTOMETRIC CARE ACCESS ACT (HR 1606),
- THE COMPETITIVE HEALTH INSURANCE REFORM ACT (HR 372), AND
- RECOGNITION AND FUNDING FOR PREVENTIVE AND MEDICALLY NECESSARY EYE AND VISION CARE AS INCLUDED IN THE HOUSE-PASSED AHCA

For more information, please contact Matt Willette (mwillette@aoa.org) 703-837-1001 or Chase Cannon (ccannon@aoa.org) 703-837-1013 of the AOA Washington Office.

The members of the American Optometric Association — America’s Family Eye Doctors — are the nation’s frontline providers of eye and vision care. Doctors of Optometry serve patients, including America’s seniors, school-aged children, veterans and military service personnel, in about 6,500 communities across the country.

1505 Prince Street, Suite #300 · Alexandria, VA 22314 · Phone (800) 365-2219 ·