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Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515-3814

January 28, 1999

The Honorable Nancy-Ann DeParle  
Administrator  
Health Care Financing Administration  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Administrator DeParle:

I have been contacted by some of my constituents concerning Medicare coverage for Augmentative Communication Devices (AAC Devices). AAC Devices provide individuals who are unable to speak, use sign language, or write because of cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, stroke, or ALS the ability to communicate and therefore lead safer and more productive lives.

Over a decade ago, the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) issued a National Coverage Determination that AAC Devices were not covered by Medicare. They were classified as "communicators" and deemed to be a non-medical convenience. This decision also placed AAC Devices in the Durable Medical Equipment category rather than the appropriate Prosthesis category. The FDA classifies AAC Devices as prosthetics.

Since that decision, every state Medicaid program, the CHAMPUS program, the Veterans Administration and hundreds of commercial health insurers have evaluated AAC Devices and deemed them appropriate for medical coverage. I understand that HCFA has not reevaluated its long-ago decision and that no records about which AAC Device was evaluated or why the evaluators decided not to cover it exist. There have been considerable advances in AAC Device technology since that decision. For example, the Dynavox AAC Device was introduced in 1991.

HCFA's non-coverage decision denies many Medicare recipients access to a critical technology which could restore their functioning to a much higher level. I would appreciate it if you would reevaluate this technology and reconsider your non-coverage decision. Thank you very much for your prompt attention to this matter.

With all best wishes, I am

Sincerely,

William J. Coyne  
Member of Congress