

Autism Insurance Study Commission Continues Work

By: David Laxton, Communications Director for the Autism Society of North Carolina

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Treatment for autism related therapies is currently limited or excluded from insurance policies in North Carolina. The Autism Society of North Carolina and Autism Speaks have worked collaboratively to raise awareness of this issue among legislators with the goal of eventually eliminating this exclusion. The issue was brought before the Joint Study Committee on Autism Spectrum Disorder and Public Safety (Joint Study Committee on ASD) during the winter of 2010.

The second hearing of the Joint Study Committee on ASD occurred on March 4. Presenters included: Marc Lambright of Oliver Wyman Actuarial Consulting, Inc.; Carol Durell, Director of Product Development for the NC State Health Plan; Dr. Genie Komives, VP and Senior Medical Director for BCBSNC; and John McAllister, VP for Government Affairs from the NC Chamber.

Of the speakers included on the agenda it was expected that BCBSNC and the NC Chamber would be opposed to the plan. The State Health Plan, which has had difficulty with rising costs and funding was widely viewed to hold the same opinion as BCBSNC, which administers the State Health Plan. Marc Lambright was representing the actuarial firm that provided the numbers arguing for autism insurance coverage, so the number of speakers presumed to be against the measure was 3-1.

The representatives of the State Health Plan, BCBSNC and NC Chamber all expressed concern about the needs of individuals with autism and their families. They recognized that families face challenges and that the rate of incidence is increasing. However, as expected, they clearly oppose a mandate for autism insurance coverage.

The speakers disagreed on the potential costs of implementing insurance coverage. Marc Lambright estimated costs of autism insurance to be under between 0.4 and 0.9%, or in the neighborhood of an additional \$1 per premium per month. The State Health Plan, while stating that they were "neutral" on such a bill, provided estimates that the costs to its plan would be in the tens of millions. Dr. Komives, of BCBSNC, when asked about the impact of such a mandate, deferred to BCBSNC lobbyist Marc Fleming who cited "internal actuarial studies" that such a mandate would add \$5-\$10 per premium per month. Members of the study committee asked several questions about costs and why there were such varying figures. The committee requested copies of the State Health plan projections as well as BCBSNC's actuarial study so that these could be compared with the Oliver Wyman study. The committee also plans to review the impact that autism insurance has had in other states such as Texas, South Carolina, and Minnesota.

An interesting part of the argument presented by BCBS was the view that ABA or other evidence based treatments were "educational" in nature versus "medical." The implication and analogy was that insurers were being asked to cover something that focused on academic skills versus the behavioral challenges that are a result of autism – or a medical condition. While ABA or other evidence based treatments may sometimes focus on academic goals, they are also used to diminish self-abusive or aggressive behavior, and provide the individual with autism the skills or strategies that enable him or

her to understand and process information, develop language, attention span, or socially appropriate behaviors.

The majority of the hearing involved the presentations by the insurers and industry representatives. Committee members did ask for information and or clarification on several points from Lorri Unumb, Senior Policy Advisor and Counsel for Autism Speaks, who was a presenter at the first Joint Study Committee on ASD hearing. Thanks to Lorri's extensive knowledge of the issue as well as how such initiatives have worked in other states, she was able to provide clarity or corrections, as well as balance on many of the potentially confusing points and related issues.

The hearing was well-attended with numerous parents and autism advocates for insurance coverage present. Several media outlets covered the hearing and learned from families that items the State Health Plan and BCBSNC said were covered under existing plans typically were not fully covered, instead they included annual limits or coverage was denied for therapies that with another diagnosis would have been covered.

Ultimately the Study Commission will decide if they will recommend that legislation for autism insurance moves forward. The Study Commission plans for two more hearings that will include the topics of residential options for adults and public safety. The Autism Society of North Carolina and Autism Speaks will continue to meet with and educate committee members and legislators on the issues and press for transparency from the insurance industry. We will keep readers and followers informed as this important debate moves forward.