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## **Cap Bill Cosponsors Praised for Support of Medicare Beneficiaries**

(Bethesda, MD)—The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) today expressed support for legislation to assure that benefits under Medicare Part B are not restricted by caps set to be imposed in January 2006. Senator John Ensign (R-NV) introduced the Medicare Access to Rehabilitation Services Act in the Senate on February 17 and Representative Phil English (R-PA) introduced the bill in the House of Representatives. Both bills also included bipartisan cosponsors. Outpatient occupational therapy provides rehabilitation to patients with such serious conditions as stroke, multiple sclerosis, severe burns, amputations, and other significant injuries or disabilities. These services address individuals' recovery in addition to enabling their maximum independence and participation in activities of daily living.

"The bill attempts to achieve final correction of a serious policy problem in Medicare for the most vulnerable Medicare beneficiaries," said Frederick P. Somers, executive director of the American Occupational Therapy Association. The cap on Medicare benefits was created initially by the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 and has been prevented from implementation by congressional action. "However, the moratorium passed by Congress to delay cutting rehabilitation benefits will expire at the end of this year. This legislation must be passed to assure that seniors and people with disabilities get the care they are entitled to."

The cap limits the availability of occupational therapy to a dollar limit for a year, without regard for the patient's condition. "The cap set an arbitrary limit on services that gave no consideration to patient needs," said Pennsylvania Occupational Therapy Association (POTA) President Sharon Kurfuerst, OTR/L, of Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. "We must act to restore availability of the positive benefits of occupational therapy to people in Pennsylvania. Congressman English's bill will do just that."

Karen Picus, Ed D, OTR/L, president of the Nevada Occupational Therapy Association (NOTA) and director of the Occupational Therapy Program at Touro University—Nevada in Henderson, supported Senator Ensign's efforts, noting that the Senator has been a champion on this issue since his days as a member of the House of Representatives. "We are proud that our senator has taken the lead on this important issue," Picus said.

Under the cap, if a patient reached the cap of \$1,500 for occupational therapy in 1 year, they would have no further access from that provider. Dr. Picus pointed out the serious, negative impact of the cap. "In rural areas like much of Nevada, patients may have no option but to stop therapy and lose function or fail to improve," she said. "These patients won't recover, and families or other care providers will be burdened." According to Picus, estimates of care for a stroke patient on average over \$3,500 in some areas, based on current Medicare payment levels.

The bill will move through the legislative process this year, with action expected before the end of 2005.

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*AOTA, POTA, and NOTA are the professional, national, and state associations for occupational therapy. Occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants, and occupational therapy students help people of all ages maximize their ability to function independently and accomplish the everyday things that allow them to participate in the activities and events that give their lives meaning. AOTA, POTA and NOTA members work in practice, policy, research, and education. Nearly one-third of all occupational therapists work in schools. A significant number work in hospitals and rehabilitation facilities, helping people recover from injury or illness. Other practice areas include mental health, driver rehabilitation, health promotion, low vision therapy, home modification to support aging in place, stress reduction, wellness, and ergonomics.*

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