
States Pass New Laws to Help Cancer Patients

By Paul Celano, MD, FACP

Receiving a cancer diagnosis is life-changing. Imagine finding out that the best (and potentially the only) FDA-approved treatment that will offer you the best chance at survival, has potentially fewer side effects and allows you to continue to work can be administered at home in pill form. What a relief, right? Yet, this therapy may be out of reach simply because many health insurance benefit designs haven't kept up with technology.

We're not treating cancer today the same way we did 10 years ago. We're making progress. Yet many health plans do not cover oral anti-cancer medications at the same level as intravenous or infused anti-cancer medications given in a doctor's office or hospital.

Thankfully, legislatures in 34 states and the District of Columbia have taken action by passing "oral oncology parity" laws. These laws assist cancer patients who have coverage through a state-regulated, commercial health plan by placing limits on what patients must pay out-of-pocket to access oral anti-cancer medications.

This is good news not just for patients battling cancer today, but for those who will be diagnosed in the future. Researchers estimate that between 25 percent and 35 percent of the most promising anti-cancer therapies in development are oral therapies. Many of these new, innovative drugs target the cancer cells directly, reducing harm to healthy cells. Today we have reached a point where, for several cancers, long-term disease control is possible even when a cure is not.

Passage of "oral oncology parity" legislation remains a top priority for the cancer community around the country, both in the remaining 16 states and at the federal level. However there are important steps that health care providers and advocates can take now to learn more about these laws and how to ensure patients are benefiting from these protections.

The State Patients Equal Access Coalition (SPEAC) has launched a website at <http://www.speac.myeloma.org/> to help physicians, nurses, patients, caregivers and other health care providers learn more about which states have the laws in place, who is covered and where to turn for additional resources. State-specific Fact Sheets for the 34 states and D.C. are available for downloading, which explain the law and where to turn if you feel a health plan is not in compliance.

Passing legislation to protect cancer patients is important, but the battle doesn't end there. It's critical that all of us work together to ensure that patients and health care providers know these laws are in place, understand how they may assist patients in accessing their prescribed therapies and where they can turn for additional help.

Paying for innovative, life-changing anti-cancer therapies remains a challenge, but we're succeeding in offer patients some protections. Visit the SPEAC website today to learn more about this ongoing effort and how you can help educate and empower patients and those who care for them.



Paul Celano, MD, FACP is the President of the Maryland /DC Society of Clinical Oncology. He is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and received his MD from the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. He did his training in Internal Medicine at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in

Philadelphia. He completed his Medical Oncology fellowship at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. He was a fulltime faculty member at Johns Hopkins for 9 years. He has been Chief, Division of Medical Oncology at the Greater Baltimore Medical Center. He continues to have part time faculty appointments at Johns Hopkins as Assistant Professor of Oncology, Gynecology and Obstetrics.
