

April 15, 2008

Sen. John Marty
Chair, Sen. Health, Housing & Family Security Committee
328 State Capitol
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Sen. Marty:

The physicians on the MMA Minority and Cross Cultural Affairs Committee were disappointed that the Interpreters Services Work Group (ISWG) failed to recommend a solution for funding interpreter services when it released its report Feb. 4, 2008.

The ISWG did a thorough job of documenting Minnesota's need for interpreter services, and then showed a lack of leadership by failing to recommend a sensible way to pay for them.

By avoiding a solution, the group's work unfortunately helps to perpetuate the unsustainable status quo. The current system disproportionately burdens community clinics, hospitals, and private clinics that work with immigrant and refugee populations. Since interpreter services can cost more than the reimbursement for a visit, the status quo will add to the impoverishment of these underfunded clinics and hospitals. It also has the potential to compound existing health disparities between English and non-English speakers in Minnesota.

The ISWG should have supported requiring private insurers to cover interpreter services. We believe this would be a relatively easy and painless step toward ensuring a broader funding source for these services. We did some research and learned that in 2007 the state of Minnesota spent about \$2 million on interpreter services, or about 0.0003 percent of the \$6.5 billion it spent on health care. Surely, it's better to have the private insurance market absorb such a relatively small cost, than to concentrate it among underfunded community clinics and hospitals with high volumes of non-English speaking patients.

It's clear that Minnesota lawmakers know the importance of these services, since Minnesota's state programs provide reimbursement. Why shouldn't private insurers be held to the same standard? This year California is implementing a requirement that its private insurers cover interpreter services. Minnesota should continue to be a leader on this issue and do the same.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fatima Jiwa', written in a cursive style.

Fatima Jiwa, M.D.
Chair, MMA Minority and Cross Cultural Affairs Committee