



November 17, 1999

Marc P. Volavka, Executive Director
Pennsylvania Health Care Cost
Containment Council
225 Market Street, Suite 400
Harrisburg, PA 17101

Dear Mr. Volavka:

Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield appreciates the opportunity to comment on the HC4's report, "The Role of HMOs in Managing Diabetes." Highmark is represented in the report with three lines of business: KeystoneBlue commercial HMO, SelectBlue commercial POS, and SecurityBlue Medicare HMO. Together, these plans cover over 1.2 million members in Western Pennsylvania.

In 1998, Highmark served nearly 31,000 diabetic members in these health plans (this number is closer to 39,000 today). As with all its members, Highmark's goal is to help these members live longer, better lives. In April 1998, Highmark embarked upon the implementation of a comprehensive diabetes management program with the help of a national firm specializing in this service. So, as part of the diabetes disease management program, Highmark works closely with these members and their doctors to reach treatment and lifestyle goals that are designed to improve their quality of life. These goals are also designed to reduce the need for high-cost treatments or procedures that are necessary when these types of diseases are not diagnosed, treated and controlled early.

Highmark is working toward continuous quality improvement and is pleased with a number of current performance measures. For example, Highmark's rate of diabetic retinal exams has improved each year; early detection through these tests may have played a role in avoiding other serious problems. As another indication, a study Highmark is now conducting indicates that hospital admissions and days for our diabetic members are declining while the number of diabetics having Glyco-Hemoglobin tests, another preventive screening test, is increasing.

In addition, Highmark has received positive satisfaction results in a recent survey of members and doctors involved in our Diabetes Disease Management program. Over 90% of our member respondents reported good, very good or excellent scores for the program's performance in providing information and helping them stay well. Over 80% of our doctor respondents reported good, very good or excellent scores for the program's effectiveness in improving patient health.

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This HC4 report documents a number of steps that Highmark has taken to partner with its diabetic members and their doctors to improve the quality of their lives. Mailings to members, primary physicians, and specialists reminding them of the benefits of prevention, is just one example. While the list of these initiatives is long, some patients appear non-compliant in this report. As an example, some patients had their diabetic retinal eye exams prior to or after the reporting year (1998). The truth is that this report is just a snapshot of one year in an ongoing program. It cannot tell the whole story about Highmark's efforts. Highmark remains committed to working with its diabetic members to ensure that they receive the proper care at the proper time.

Highmark's commendable accreditation by the National Committee on Quality Assurance (NCQA) is a reflection of the plans' performance with its diabetic members as well as its other members. This national accrediting body recently reported that plans that consistently monitor and report on quality care and which have NCQA accreditation showed significant improvements in quality and outperformed those plans that do not. Highmark is pleased to be one of those well-performing plans.

Highmark has participated in efforts to provide information and advice to the HC4 as it begins to develop reports on managed care. The company remains committed to assisting the HC4 to ensure that the Council's reports are as accurate and useful as possible for all Pennsylvanians.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "George F. Grode", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

George F. Grode

Executive Vice President

Government Business and Corporate Affairs