March 27, 2008

BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee
Medical Policy
801 Pine Street, 2E
Chattanooga, TN 37402

To Whom It May Concern:

The American Gastroenterological Association (AGA) and the AGA Institute comprise the nation’s oldest not-for-profit medical specialty society and the largest society of gastroenterologists, representing more than 16,000 physicians and scientists who are involved in research, clinical practice and education on disorders of the digestive system.

On behalf of our members and their patients, I am writing in reference to Blue Cross Blue Shield of Tennessee’s Medical draft medical policy DMP0208-02 on the “Use of Anesthesia Services for Routine Gastrointestinal Endoscopy” that has been posted for public comment.

Colorectal cancer is the second leading cause of death among all Americans. Despite recommendations that everyone age 50+ get screened for colorectal cancer, only a fraction of this group has been checked. This is a major public health concern. AGA members worry that our efforts to increase colorectal cancer screening will be undercut by payors that decrease physicians’ control of screening methods, sedation agents and the presence of medical team members – in this case, anesthesia professionals. Not all patients can be sedated with moderate sedation. Anesthesiologists are necessary for patients who need deep sedation, but whose endoscopists are not trained to administer deep sedation.

The AGA shares the concerns of our members that such policies could undercut efforts to increase colorectal cancer screening rates and request that Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Tennessee defer implementation of this draft policy. We recommend that you meet with gastroenterologists and others who perform endoscopic services to better understand regional differences, rationale for use of anesthesia professionals, emerging devices and pharmaceuticals for sedation, and the nuances of practices with the goal of addressing the possible effect of the policy on public health and the potential impact on colorectal cancer screening rates.

The AGA is available to speak directly with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Tennessee about this issue. Please let us know what other assistance AGA can provide you in this process.

Sincerely,

Nicholas F. LaRusso, MD, AGAF
President, AGA Institute

AGA Education, Practice and Research