

June 24, 2008

Michael M. E. Johns, M.D.
Institute of Medicine
The National Academies
500 Fifth St. NW
Washington DC 20001

RE: Optimizing Medical Trainee (Resident) Schedules to Improve Patient Safety

Dear Dr. Johns:

We are writing to express our deep interest in the Institute of Medicine committee that you chair which is charged with examining the impact on patient safety of the long hours that medical trainees in the nation's teaching hospitals are currently required to work.

As representatives of consumer and patient safety organizations, we note that the public is by and large unaware of the prevalence of 24-30 hour "on-call" shifts in the nation's teaching hospitals. Nor are they aware that medical trainees get little or no sleep during these shifts and are routinely scheduled to work these shifts many times a month and throughout their years of training.

Yet it is the public that is placed at risk by these working conditions (in addition to the residents themselves). Published scientific evidence has linked fatigue with an increased rate of medical errors, as well as car crashes as the resident drives home from work. Of course, the car crashes represent a risk to other drivers, in addition to the residents.

We are therefore concerned that the perspective of the public has not been a prominent feature of the three public meetings the IOM has called on this issue. While the members of organized medicine have had every opportunity to air their views, only two consumer groups were invited to address the panel.

We are confident that the Committee will weigh the considerable scientific evidence – across all industries – that links long work hours with attentional failures, performance deficits and increased medical errors. We trust that the Committee will keep first and foremost on its agenda the interests of patients, who deserve to be cared for by medical trainees who are not impaired by acute or chronic sleep deprivation. Evidence and commonsense tells us that:

- Working shifts of 24-30 consecutive hours with little or no sleep is not safe.
- A health care system that depends on the cheap labor of medical trainees cannot be entrusted to enforce hours limits on those trainees.
- The federal government should step in to regulate the number of hours that medical trainees can safely work, just as it regulates other industries that are entrusted with the public's safety.

Thank you for this opportunity to give you and your committee this consumer perspective.

Sincerely,

Merrill Goozner
Director, Integrity in Science Project
Center for Science in the Public Interest
1875 Connecticut Ave. NW Suite 300
Washington DC 20009

Amy Allina
Program Director
National Women's Health Network
514 10th St. NW Suite 400
Washington DC 20004

cc: Dianne Wolman, Senior Program Officer