

# The Coalition

April 2004

Advocates for Ethical Mental Health Care

## Editor's Corner

Peter N. Moore, Psy.D.

Good things sometimes come in small packages. Well this issue of The Coalition is a bit smaller than normal but no less informative.

If you are a solo practitioner who buys your own health insurance, Jane Palmer's lead article is a must read for you. Unbeknownst to at least some of you, as an individual in private practice, you may be able to take advantage of buying health insurance as a small business and get better coverage and perhaps save some premium dollars. But this, as they say, is a limited time offer thanks to events in the recently completed legislative session.

You may recall that about a year ago, Regence established a mental health advisory committee that included practitioners of various stripes. The Coalition has not one but two representatives to that group, Laura Groshong, our lobbyist, and Sue Wiedenfeld, the Board Chair. Sue brings us up to date about her experience with that committee.

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## Who Ya Gonna Call !?!?!!

Coalition Helpline: 206-444-4304

Who's My Legislator: 1-800-448-4881 (State and Federal)

Legislative Hotline: 1-100-562-6000

## Small Business Insurance Available to Solo Practitioners: But Hurry !!!

Jane Palmer

Are you in private practice, have no employees, and derive a minimum of 75% of your income from your practice? If so, you may be eligible to buy health insurance as a small business owner, *perhaps* saving yourself some money, but definitely finding a greater choice of health plans with broader benefits.

However, as a sole proprietor or self-employed business of one, you only have until June 10, 2004 to take advantage of this little known opportunity. The Washington State Legislature recently passed H.B. 2460 allowing health insurance carriers to eliminate sole proprietors from the category of "small business." Although sole proprietors who currently have small business health insurance will be allowed to maintain their current status, any sole proprietor who applies for health insurance after the June deadline will be forced to buy health insurance as an individual with fewer benefits and possibly higher cost.

The Coalition opposed passage of this legislation which also eliminated mandated mental health benefit coverage for all small business health insurance. Not only does this legislation prove a significant set-back to consumer's rights to quality mental health, but it eliminates market place choice for a large number of small businesses.

Please see *Small Bus. Ins.p2*

However, in the process of considering this bill, the Coalition Board realized few members even knew of the existence of the small business health insurance market. This article is designed to make you aware of the advantages so you can be an informed consumer and possibly make a switch before the option is gone.

Small business health insurance offers considerable advantage over individual plans for many businesses. Small business health insurance offers mental health and chemical dependency benefits, whereas individual health insurance does not. After June, sole proprietors in Washington State will no longer be able to purchase health insurance that covers mental health benefits.

Small business owners have a greater choice of health plans than do individuals. For example, Regence Blue Shield offers thirty – eight different medical plans and seven prescription drug plans to small businesses, but only five medical/drug combination plans to individuals. Similarly, Group Health Cooperative offers twenty different plans to small businesses, but only five to individuals. Premera Blue Cross allows small business to match six different medical plans with five different prescription drug plans. These 30 small business choices compare to 7 available plans for individuals. The number of plans vary according to benefit coverage (e.g. preventive care included or not), network coverage (e.g. out-of-network providers covered or not), member maximum out-of-pocket costs, and member shared costs (e.g. deductible, co-pay, co-insurance.)

Small business owners may find some cost advantage in purchasing health insurance as a business. For example, a non-smoking, female sole proprietor between the ages of 55 to 59 would be able to purchase business health insurance from Group Health Cooperative for \$246 - \$448 per month, depending upon benefit plan chosen. Individual comprehensive insurance

premiums from GHC range from \$328 - \$383. Similarly at Regence, monthly premiums range from \$351 to \$573 for a small business, and from \$372 to \$445 for an individual. At Premera, using the same example, monthly small business premiums range from \$341 - \$672, while individual plan premiums are \$320 - \$659.

If you are a sole proprietor, consider letting your state representatives know of your disapproval of this legislation and that you would like to reverse it so that sole proprietors can stay in the small business health insurance market. It may also be to your advantage to contact your health insurance carrier immediately to explore the small business health insurance options open to you up to June 10. Contact information is as follows: Group Health Cooperative 206-448-4141, Premera 800-422-0032, Regence Blue Shield 206-464-5527.

### **Mark Your Calendars Now !!!!**

### **THE COALITON'S 10<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY BASH**

**Yes, it has been 10 years since the founding of The Coalition. To celebrate, come join the Board and Honored Guests: Randy Reville, Sen. Pat Thibaudeau, Rep. Frank Chopp, Rep. Shay Schual-Burke, and Rep. Tom Campbell and others from the mental health community.**

***Light refreshments served.***

**When: Thursday, April 29, 7-9pm**

**Where: 1301 Spring Street  
(Penthouse), Seattle, WA**

**Please RSVP to Gail Rosenberg at  
[gser!@comcast.com](mailto:gser!@comcast.com) or 425-821-2121**

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## Regence Advisory Committee Update

By Sue Wiedenfeld, Coalition Chair

In September, 2002, Regence Blue Shield created the Behavioral Health Advisory Committee (BHAC), a formal way to solicit provider input for Regence administrative policies. BHAC is made up of about 20 clinicians of all mental health disciplines from all over the state, including myself, Laura Groshong, LICSW and Coalition Lobbyist, and 10 Regence executives. To Regence's credit, we believe this is the first major insurance company to set up such an advisory committee in the state of Washington. We hope that other major insurance companies will follow their lead. The Coalition wants its members to be aware of the progress BHAC has made.

Phil Hirsch, Ph.D., a psychologist, chairs the meetings. Elizabeth Buchman, Regence's head of their behavioral health component and a Regence vice president sets the agenda.

One of the first issues to be considered by the BHAC was the Regence decision to take administration of mental health benefits in-house and not to renew their contract with Magellan. We were able to have direct input into the set up of the new plan which was implemented in January, 2003, and requires only verification of eligibility with no authorization or treatment reports.

Recently, the BHAC reviewed outpatient mental health usage in the first and second quarters of 2003, with particular attention to the increases of 13% in the first quarter and 20% in the second quarter. The BHAC discussed the fact that the increases were not specific to practitioner group, diagnosis, age, gender or any other discrete factor. The increases were seen across the board in medical usage as well and was reported by other insurance companies for the period. The BHAC is looking at specific ways to understand mental health usage and come up with a reasonable baseline. Our sense is that this has concerned Regence

The uniformity of opinion among practitioners from varied settings (e.g. schools, clinics, organizations, private practice) about a wide variety of issues has impressed me. At first, my impression was that some issues were already decided and that practitioner opinion would have little impact. However, I have been impressed by Regence's openness to try a period of unmanaged care and their willingness to change their emphasis, terms, or plan in response to the advisory committee's input. The meetings become exciting when Regence and the practitioners share similar perspectives. The tenor of the meetings is, for the most part cooperative, without an adversarial feeling. Regence has seemed genuinely interested in our experience with their insurance and patient care. Sometimes they are surprised to learn of patterns or predictable outcomes that we as practitioners take for granted.

An ongoing goal of the BHAC is to balance providing high quality appropriate mental health services, high consumer satisfaction, and cost effectiveness, which, of course, can be difficult.

The Coalition believes in the value of the BHAC because: 1) the BHAC minimizes the gap between practitioners and policy and gives clinicians input into the policies that affect them directly, and 2) the BHAC is an invitation to other major insurance companies to include practitioners in their mental health policy making process. Stay tuned for future updates!

The Coalition of Mental Health  
Professionals and Consumers  
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Seattle, WA 98103

**AN \* BY YOUR NAME ON THE MAILING LABEL INDICATES THAT WE DID NOT RECEIVE YOUR DUES LAST YEAR. PLEASE RENEW NOW TO HELP DEFRAY COSTS OF THE NEWSLETTER, LOBBYING EXPENSES, THE INSURANCE SURVEY, BROWN BAG MEETINGS AND OTHER COALITION ACTIVITIES. THANKS !**

**Join or Renew Your Commitment to Protect Mental Health Care**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ Fax: \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Member: \$65      Willing to help with specific tasks (mailings, phone work): YES \_\_\_\_\_  
Student: \$15  
Consumer: Free      Do NOT publish my work information in a member directory . \_\_\_\_\_  
Organization: \$124