Feb. 12, 2018

Dear Secretary Azar:

I am writing on behalf of the Association of Health Care Journalists, the world's largest organization of reporters, editors, and producers who cover health care. We congratulate you on your appointment as Secretary of Health and Human Services -- and we welcome reports that you intend to improve openness and transparency at HHS.

That is a worthy goal, and we hope you will make it a priority throughout your tenure. Explaining the department's decisions through the media is the best way to help the public understand and appreciate your goals and policies.

To that end, we urge you to hold an open press conference as soon as possible, and to make a regular practice of doing so.

We were puzzled and disheartened that one of your first interactions with the media involved a conversation last week with three select reporters about drug prices and the president's budget, followed by a failure to help other reporters understand the proposals, even after the embargo lifted. HHS's decision to provide such important information exclusively to readers of three news outlets sends a message, unwittingly or not, that the department speaks to a handful of elites, rather than all Americans.

CMS Administrator Seema Verma has similarly made a practice of restricting her interactions with the media to briefings with a few reporters. It's mysterious why some reporters are selected and others excluded. We were especially dismayed earlier this month when a reporter was abruptly removed from a press call apparently as punishment for refusing to alter a story. That type of assault on press freedoms must not be repeated.

We urge you to encourage Administrator Verma to hold regular, open press briefings, in person and by phone, as her predecessors have done. The public can only benefit when the leader of an agency overseeing health care for more than 130 million Americans answers questions about that agency's work.

Other leaders at HHS provide commendable examples of openness and transparency. FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb and NIH Director Francis Collins write blog posts, meet with a range of reporters, and appear at public events. The CDC has been holding regular briefings, providing vital information about the flu epidemic and other matters affecting everyone's health. We hope that such frequent, open communication will become a matter of course throughout HHS.
We would be happy to meet with you, and with leaders of your media team, to discuss these issues and ways to clear the path to better communication with the public.

Thank you for your attention to this issue.

Sincerely,

Ivan Oransky, M.D.
President, Association of Health Care Journalists

cc: Seema Verma, Scott Gottlieb, Francis Collins, Anne Schuchat, Charmaine Yoest, Matt Lloyd, Bill Hall, Mark Weber, Ryan Murphy, Johnathan Monroe, Jennifer Rodriguez, Renate Miles, Amanda Fine, Kathleen Nellis Chastney