

January 29, 2016

Mark S. DeFrancesco, MD, MBA
President, American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
409 12th Street SW
Washington, DC 20024

Dear Dr. DeFrancesco,

I write to you out of concern regarding the ongoing Zika virus outbreak and its impact in the Americas, Samoa, and Cape Verde, especially on pregnant women and children. According to the World Health Organization, the Zika virus is now “spreading explosively” through the Americas and has been reported in 23 countries. While local transmission of the disease has not yet been reported in the continental United States, 31 travel-related Zika infections have been documented in 11 states and the District of Columbia. This is in addition to 19 cases in Puerto Rico and one in the U.S. Virgin Islands due to domestic transmission. In the Americas, it is anticipated that the outbreak could infect up to 4 million people. Because Zika is carried by low-moisture dwelling mosquitos, local transmission is predicted to spread to all countries and territories where the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito is found, including the United States. There is a critical and urgent need for a robust and coordinated response at all levels.

Zika virus presents serious health threats to pregnant women and their unborn children. When contracted by pregnant women, Zika virus has been linked with microcephaly, a serious birth defect that can confer long-term neurocognitive consequences, including developmental delay, problems with vision, hearing, or speech, and epilepsy in children. It is critical that we better understand the nature of the link between the virus and microcephaly, as well as other potential negative pregnancy and public health outcomes. Further, only one in five infected persons demonstrates any symptoms of Zika, meaning many pregnant women could become infected and potentially risk serious birth defects without their knowledge. This makes increased education for providers and patients all the more critical to ensure that women have increased awareness of the risks associated with travel and the virus.

Zika requires an aggressive and comprehensive response, including critical prevention efforts. A key factor in mitigating the impact of Zika virus will be the informed response by health practitioners in the U.S. and abroad. As the primary professional organization for obstetricians and gynecologists, your members are on the front lines of this fight. I appreciate the steps that you have taken to keep providers up-to-date on the many Zika-related considerations – including with regards to professional recommendations, screening procedures, and tools to educate and

increase awareness among the families they serve – and urge you to continue to do so. I also urge you to continue your work with federal agencies, and work with international partners in countries facing the greatest Zika virus burden, in an effort to ensure all affected populations can benefit from your organization’s critical expertise. Their efforts and yours will make a world of difference in the global battle against Zika virus.

While there is far too much we still don’t know about the impacts of Zika virus on pregnancy and children born after maternal exposure, it is clear that Zika demands our collective urgent attention. Thank you for your ongoing efforts to keep our families safe. Please keep me apprised of any way I can be of assistance in helping you reach out to your members on this issue.

Sincerely,

Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions