September 4, 2014

To : Bradford Berk, MD, Ph.D.

 CEO, URMC

From: Physical Therapy Alliance of Upstate New York

RE: URMC policies on outside referrals

Dear Dr. Berk;

The Physical Therapy Alliance of Upstate New York (PTAUNY) is an organization of private practice physical therapists in the Rochester and Buffalo Region. Our membership is extensive and includes a great majority of the private practices in the region. Our long term mission is to keep our membership informed of local and national trends, to provide educational opportunities and to provide guidance in protecting the interests of our practices.

Many of our members have been practicing in the Rochester region for decades and have developed long lasting relationships with patients and referring providers and this includes most of the providers at URMC. We feel that our relationship with URMC is strong and there is a significant mutual respect between us.

This brings us to a topic that has been of great concern for our membership and now is our time to register our concern to you as the CEO of URMC. Our membership has perceived and has witnessed through specific patient interactions that URMC has been making it difficult for URMC providers to refer patients outside the URMC network to our member clinics.

The following behaviors have been observed by our patients, our families and our members:

1. URMC providers having difficulty accessing and generating an EMR referral slip to an outside provider. This is a mechanical boundary to outside referrals which is detrimental to patients resuming services with our providers with whom they have had long standing relationships . We also realize that there may be some learning curves with the evolving EMR system.
2. Policies that prohibit our members from visiting URMC (and affiliated hospital systems) offices to introduce our services and newer providers to URMC providers with whom our member clinics have had long standing relationships.
3. Policies that limit patient access to our clinics such as: a) athletic trainers and staff escorting s/p surgery patients to the rehab services department of the hospital without any choice given or any education as to clinics close to the patients work or home offering the same services. b) having patients go to PT to have their sutures removed in combination with a PT visit and script. c) Uncooperative front desk staff when patients ask if there are clinics close to home. d) Specific cases of providers telling patients that our member clinics are not qualified to perform certain services (very few, but well documented unethical behavior). However, 99% of the providers at URMC enjoy a great relationship with our membership.
4. We have heard of punitive pressures placed on providers who, based on tracking, refer too much outside of the URMC network. If this is the case, it is very much problematic to our organization.

We do understand that URMC providers are encouraged to promote the use of in- house URMC services. This is obviously a good business practice. We do not believe that placing administrative barriers, punitive pressures and technological obstacles that eliminate patient choices is ethical or supportive of a close knit medical community. Behaviors of this type are harmful to the consumer and create ill will. It is our belief that there is a responsibility to the consumer that IF a hospital system or provider has the opportunity to refer to a service that is owned by the hospital system, THEN there is a responsibility to inform the patient that there are similar services available in the community in which they live. This is the right and ethical practice in a situation where a professional service is rendered. This is also in keeping with the best interests of third party payers.

It is our sincere hope that you as CEO will review URMC referral policies and that they remain consistent with ethical, honest and fair practices, that give consumers of health care the opportunity to choose the setting that is appropriate and desirable. As well, we hope this creates an opportunity to clear up any misinformation we may have heard.

In closing, please realize that we are URMC supporters and are proud to have a health care system that is recognized locally and regionally as an asset to the community. Thank you for your time and consideration in recognizing our concerns.

Sincerely;

Physical Therapy Alliance of Upstate New York