

COALITION IN SUPPORT OF SAVING THE AFIP

March 28, 2007

PRESERVE THE ARMED FORCES INSTITUTE OF PATHOLOGY IN EMERGENCY SUPPLEMENTAL BILL

CRITICAL TO MILITARY AND VETERANS HEALTH CARE

Dear Senator:

The undersigned members of the Coalition to Preserve the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP), representing a broad array of medical specialties, patient care, and veterans groups, urge you to support the Kennedy Amendment to Senate Bill S.965 to ensure that the AFIP and its critical medical services, currently located on the Walter Reed campus, are retained. Keeping the AFIP intact is critical to the health of our men and women in uniform, our veterans and the public at large.

The AFIP provides our military, veterans and public health workers with the highest concentration of medical expertise found under one roof in the nation. The AFIP Tissue Repository is a national resource that houses the world's largest and most comprehensive collection of pathology specimens. A Consensus Conference of independent experts in 2005 reviewed this resource and adamantly supported its value, modernization and continued operation, calling it a "globally unique Tissue Repository." It has a history of finding the answers to rare and complex medical conditions, has been in the forefront of scientific breakthroughs, such as work that is critical to preparing for avian flu transmission [the Bird Flu], and contributes significantly to the education and training of both military and civilian medical professionals.

Unfortunately, the Department of Defense (DoD) has proposed putting this world-renowned facility on the chopping block along with the closure of Walter Reed. Although the final Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) report left open the possibility for preserving key functions of the AFIP, additional clarification provided by the Kennedy amendment is needed to remove any doubt about its future. A recent Bearing Point report commissioned by the Office of the Army Surgeon General recognized the importance of preserving the AFIP. The report concluded that the AFIP should be maintained stating that: "For DoD, disestablishment may result in the loss of immediate response capability to medical threats that could impact combat effectiveness or operational forces. For the nation, it eliminates robustness in capacity to respond to potential bioterrorism threats such as the recent anthrax and SARS situations." This report and its recommendations have been ignored by the Department of Defense.

Since its inception over a century ago, the AFIP has built its reputation through excellence in pathology diagnosis and consultation, education, and research. During a typical year, AFIP consults on over 92,000 cases, of which 27,000 were cytology cases for the United States Air Force. Approximately 55,000 of those cases were sent to the AFIP for an expert "second opinion". These second opinion cases are relatively evenly distributed from military (35%),

Veterans Administration (VA) (35%) and civilian (30%) sources. These were largely complex, diagnostically difficult, or controversial cases.

These consultative services allow military physicians and providers in the VA health system access to a vast bank of knowledge possessed by the physicians, medical, and scientific professionals at the AFIP. In turn, these second opinions provide information that is instrumental in determining the course of treatment for the patient. The AFIP is also able to connect military and VA health data on individual patients by allowing a biopsy from a soldier to be easily compared to a subsequent biopsy when the soldier becomes a veteran.

The AFIP has been a model for integrating military, veterans and civilian medicine to improve the well being of our troops and those returning home. Outsourcing consults, as the DoD has recommended, is not the answer. In fact, outsourcing important diagnostic tests that identify infectious disease, deadly viruses and cancers would only dramatically increase the potential for disconnects, and therefore further diminish the continuity of care that our veterans currently receive.

Disestablishment of the AFIP will only strain an already overburdened military and veterans health care system. We urge you to vote in favor of this amendment and preserve the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology.

Sincerely,

Alzheimer's Association
American Academy of Ophthalmology
American Association for Dental Research
American Association for the Study of Liver Disease
American Association of Medical Colleges
American Cancer Society
American College of Radiologists
American Dental Association
American Medical Association
American Society for Bone and Mineral Research
American Society for Clinical Pathology
American Society for Investigative Pathology
American Society for Microbiology

American Society of Cytopathology
American Urological Association
Association for Molecular Pathology
Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology
Association of Pathology Chairs
College of American Pathologists
Friends of Cancer Research
Hawaii State Society of Pathologists
National Alliance for Eye and Vision Research
National Association of Medical Examiners
Susan G. Koman for the Cure