



OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

UNITED STATES
OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT
WASHINGTON, DC 20415-0001

JAN 27 2006

The Honorable Christopher Smith
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Smith:

Thank you for your recent communication concerning applied behavior analysis (ABA) for autism. You asked that the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) direct the Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) Program carriers to provide information on the extent of their coverage for therapies such as ABA.

OPM has conducted an extensive literature review on ABA and consulted with medical experts in this field. While it appears that ABA is considered a promising behavioral intervention therapy for autism, there is no strong scientific evidence of its benefit. A National Library of Medicine "Medline" search of the scientific literature from 1966 to present revealed no evidenced-based articles on behavioral therapy of autism. The current evidence rests on small numbers of children with autism treated over several years. ABA has not yet been proven in randomized experimental trials and is considered to be experimental or investigational. Therefore, benefits coverage under the FEHB Program is not available.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Research Council indicate that more replicative studies with improved methodology are needed before ABA can be recommended for all autistic children. The National Institute of Mental Health reported in April 2004, "Research is beginning to show that specific medical and behavioral treatments, and combinations of these treatments, are effective in ameliorating various problems that are often associated with autism. Further research is needed to fully evaluate the efficacy and effectiveness of such treatments."¹ In May 2004, the National Institutes of Health's Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee reported that "Randomized controlled trials of behavioral interventions are also needed, as well as outcome measures for behavioral treatment studies."²

Under its mental health coverage, the Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) Program provides benefits for services related to autism as it does for medical conditions. For example, if a specific service (e.g., speech therapy) is covered by a FEHB Plan, the service cannot be excluded if it is prescribed to treat autism. These mental health benefits, along with pre-authorization requirements, limitations, and exclusions of services considered experimental or investigational are described in each carrier's plan brochure available during open season. As with any type of service (medical or mental), regardless of the condition, OPM cannot authorize benefits for services that are considered to be experimental or investigational.

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It is OPM's most sincere hope that one day randomized trials will demonstrate ABA to be an effective course of treatment for autism and no longer be considered investigational. OPM has great empathy for the families affected by this tragic disorder, and regret our decision could not be more favorable.

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to your interest in this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LMS', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Linda M. Springer
Director

¹ Department of Health and Human Service, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health, Congressional Appropriations Committee Report on the State of Autism Research, April 2004, Pg. 16.

² Department of Health and Human Services, Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee, Meeting Highlights, May 11, 2004, National Institute of Health, Pg. 3.