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November 21, 2003

The Honorable William M. Thomas
Chairman, Committee on Ways and Means
1102 Longworth House Office Building
House of Representatives
Washington DC, 20515

Dear Chairman Thomas:

We address this letter to you in your role as Chairman of the Conference Committee crafting the Medicare modernization legislation, HR 1 and S 1.

Over the last two years the American Heart Association worked closely with several members of Congress on an effort to provide seniors in the Medicare program access to important cardiovascular screening tests. Science has shown that simple and inexpensive preventive measures, such as cholesterol screening tests, can reveal a person's risk of developing a deadly heart condition or suffering a stroke long before these deadly conditions occur. As the nation's number one and number three killers respectively, the positive impact of such preventive tests must be taken seriously. Without access to preventive measures, those in the Medicare community will be left unaware of these often-silent killers until they are victims of disease.

This year, Congress wisely incorporated cardiovascular screening legislation into the Medicare Prescription Drug and Modernization Act of 2003. The text of the legislation related to these tests leaves much-needed flexibility in the hands of the Secretary of Health and Human Services and permits this new benefit to be updated as science and testing methods improve with time. For the first time preventive tests are permitted for the nation's leading cause of death, and the impact of this on the nation's health will be impressive. Those who sponsored and supported HR 721 and S 382 deserve a great deal of recognition for their service to improving the nation's health.

Congress should also be commended for several other provisions included in the bill. The American Heart Association is pleased that Congress extended the moratorium on rehabilitation therapy caps that threatened to adversely impact stroke patients in need of these services. The Association is also pleased that our work in partnership with the American Cancer Society and the American Diabetes Association regarding both an "Initial Preventive Physical Examination" for Medicare beneficiaries and our joint effort to ensure diabetes screenings were included in the final bill were successful. As you well know, the vast majority of Medicare beneficiaries suffer from two or more chronic conditions and the American Heart Association knows that we must treat the patient as a whole rather than address their separate illnesses.

The American Heart Association wishes to thank those involved with drafting the Medicare Prescription Drug and Modernization Act of 2003 for including these provisions in a final bill.

Sincerely,

Augustus O. Grant, MD., PhD.
President

CC: Members of the United States Senate and House of Representatives