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September 1, 2017

Senator Sue Serino, Chair Senate Task Force on Lyme and Tick-Borne Diseases
Senator Kemp Hannon, Chair Senate Standing Committee on Health

Re: Association between the opioid crisis and the Lyme epidemic

Greeting Senators Serino and Hanson,

As a follow up to the meeting on Tuesday, I would like to add something that was not in my advanced written testimony.

In the hearing, there were references by committee members to the opioid crisis. As a psychiatrist, I deal with this problem as well as Lyme disease. I don't think the link between the opioid crisis and the Lyme disease epidemic was apparent to the committee members.

I shall describe a representative case history describing something I have seen far too many times.

A young patient acquires Lyme/tick-borne diseases and the diagnosis is missed, dismissed and/or they are undertreated. The symptoms progress over a period of years to include psychiatric symptoms, chronic pain and other symptoms. Eventually they are prescribed pain medications and/or other controlled substances or they acquire these medications through other means. Their use of pain medications (opioids) and other controlled substances increases and becomes an addiction. They may then turn to multiple physicians, multiple pharmacies, illegitimate sources of drugs and/or turn to illegal activity. They attempt to overcome their addiction, have a period of sobriety, then have some triggering event, relapse and take the dose of opioid they had previously used. However, the period of sobriety altered their tolerance to the drug and that same dose is now a lethal dose. They are discovered deceased and everyone is surprised, puzzled and grief stricken.

The point I would like to make to the Committee is that inadequately diagnosed and inadequately treated Lyme/Tick-Borne Diseases as well as inadequately treated mental illnesses are contributing to the opioid epidemic. Clearly not all opioid deaths are associated with Lyme or mental illnesses, but many are and better attention to both of these problems can contribute to reducing the severity of the opioid crisis.

Sincerely,

Robert C. Bransfield MD, DLFAPA