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American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy (ASGE) and the Society of Gastroenterology Nurses and Associates (SGNA) Issue Joint Statement on VA Congressional Hearing

This week, a congressional panel questioned officials with the Department of Veterans Affairs regarding errors in reprocessing (disinfecting) of endoscopes that put patients undergoing endoscopic procedures at three Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities at possible risk of exposure to hepatitis and HIV. The VA notified more than 10,000 patients to undergo follow-up blood testing.

According to a statement from the VA, as of June 8, 47 patients have tested positive for hepatitis (13 with hepatitis B and 34 with hepatitis C) and 6 for HIV, "These results do not indicate that there is any relationship between these patients' conditions and the endoscopy procedures they underwent. However, VA is conducting an epidemiologic investigation to look into the possibility of such a relationship. While reviews indicate that the transmission of hepatitis B and hepatitis C virus as a result of endoscopy procedures is extremely small and that transmission of HIV through endoscopy has never been reported, VA will appropriately counsel and care for these patients, no matter what the source of their infections may be."

The risks of infection from a gastrointestinal endoscopy are very small, at approximately 1 in 1.8 million or less. When cleaning and high-level disinfection are performed appropriately, in accordance with published ASGE and SGNA guidelines, no episodes of transmission of infection have been reported. While the reprocessing failures at these three VA facilities represent a small fraction of the millions of endoscopic procedures performed annually in the United States, it is critical that compliance with existing guidelines be maintained.

"Endoscopic procedures such as colonoscopy are safe and well-tolerated. We are deeply concerned that this situation will discourage people from undergoing life-saving procedures such

as colonoscopy, which we know detects—and even prevents—colon cancer, a largely preventable disease that claims the lives of some 50,000 people each year. We are also saddened by the fact that our veterans had to go through this difficult situation. Transmission of infections through a gastrointestinal endoscopic procedure is exceedingly rare and none have been reported when reprocessing guidelines have been followed,” said American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy (ASGE) spokesperson David A. Greenwald, MD, FASGE. “While errors in reprocessing are not acceptable, we applaud the VA’s efforts to identify and notify patients that may have been affected. As a result of the VA’s efforts, thousands of patients have been tested for the presence of viral infections. Many of these viral infections, however, can exist without symptoms or be clinically silent. Therefore, it is possible that these infections existed before the endoscopic procedures. While transmission from endoscopy is unlikely, we are strongly supportive of the VA’s efforts to demonstrate whether these reprocessing errors were in fact the source of their infection, and to prevent future errors from occurring. Further, we are pleased to hear from their testimony that they are committed to implementing systems of quality and oversight to ensure the safety of our veterans.”

ASGE and SGNA are committed to setting the highest-quality standards for gastrointestinal endoscopy through safety guidelines and the training of their members so that patients receive the best and safest care possible. In addition to developing quality guidelines, ASGE also offers the ASGE Endoscopy Unit Recognition Program, which recognizes those endoscopy units that, in addition to following safety and quality guidelines, have completed a course designed specifically to review principles of quality and safety in endoscopy.

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About the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy

Founded in 1941, the mission of the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy is to be the leader in advancing patient care and digestive health by promoting excellence in gastrointestinal endoscopy. ASGE, with nearly 11,000 members worldwide, promotes the highest standards for endoscopic training and practice, fosters endoscopic research, recognizes distinguished contributions to endoscopy, and is the foremost resource for endoscopic education. Visit www.asge.org and www.screen4coloncancer.org for more information and to find a qualified doctor in your area.

About the Society of Gastroenterology Nurses and Associates, Inc.

The Society of Gastroenterology Nurses and Associates, Inc. is a professional organization of more than 8,300 nurses and associates dedicated to the safe and effective practice of gastroenterology and endoscopy nursing. SGNA carries out its mission by advancing the science and practice of gastroenterology and endoscopy nursing through education, research, advocacy and collaboration. SGNA provides continuing education programs and services that promote the professional development of its members in an atmosphere of mutual support. Additional information is available at the SGNA Web site, www.sgna.org.

About Endoscopy

Endoscopy is performed by specially-trained physicians called endoscopists using the most current technology to diagnose and treat diseases of the gastrointestinal tract. Using flexible, thin tubes called endoscopes, endoscopists are able to access the human digestive tract without incisions via natural orifices. Endoscopes are designed with high-intensity lighting and fitted with precision devices that allow viewing and treatment of the gastrointestinal system.