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Dear Patient:

It is with deep regret that we must inform you that Rheumatology Associates, P.C. is no longer in network with United Healthcare or any of its affiliates effective 07/01/2024. We have done everything within our power to preserve our contract with United Healthcare but we have sadly been unable to resolve our difficulties with them as they have refused to extend the termination date as we requested in order to continue negotiations.

Our original contract with United Healthcare was effective 5/1/2004. Over the last 20 years, our practice has seen United Healthcare shape health care in a way that has allowed them to have full control over every aspect of your health care from having their own pharmacy benefit manager to infusion centers. This is called “vertical integration”, and it is a dark force in driving up costs and leading to worse health outcomes.¹ Unfortunately, our Congress has both passively and actively enabled United Healthgroup (UHG) to turn into the 4th largest corporation in America (just behind Walmart, Amazon and Apple)² with over 150 subsidiaries (per the SEC) and a 2023 earnings of over \$22 Billion dollars.³ Their 2023 revenue was \$371 Billion, a 14.6% increase from 2022. UHG is currently trading at \$484.04 a share.⁴ The same share would have cost \$30.75 in May of 2004 when we initially signed the current contract, an increase of 1,474%. UHG is projected to have 2024 revenue of \$400 billion dollars. Part of reaching their revenue projection hinges on further narrowing their networks. Small private practices like Rheumatology Associates that have their own infusion centers and CLIA certified labs seem to be in the crosshairs of UHG. UHG is larger than CVS Health, Exxon Mobile, JP Morgan Chase, Microsoft, Ford, Bank of America just to name a few. Small independent practices like ours stand very little chance of surviving in the climate that companies like UHG have created.

Currently, UHG is under investigation by the DOJ over antitrust concerns which we are seeing play out in our own practice. Optum, one of UHG’s subsidiaries, employs over 90,000 physicians and has been busy acquiring medical practices. 90,000 represents 10% of all physicians in the US, and that fact should terrify all of us. This makes them our largest competitor and provides an explanation as to why we allege that they are not negotiating with our practice in good faith. There is no incentive for them to do so as their business model now includes squeezing private practices to their breaking point and then purchasing them (or letting them dissolve). We have only asked for increases that would cover the cost of doing business with them. Additionally, as everyone knows all too well, inflation has negatively impacted all of us with small business’ being hit very hard. Over the last three years, the average rate of inflation was a combined 16.8%.⁵ Unfortunately, in the United States, health care is a

¹ Saghafian study with Harvard University, Harvard Medical School, MGH and University College London

² Forbes 500 ranking for 2024, Forbes ranks by revenue

³ UHG publicly released earnings report

⁴ As of end of day 6/26/2024

⁵ Investopedia article listing inflation rate by year

business, and we are forced to engage with insurance companies whose bottom line is completely incongruent with what is best for your health. Their primary concern, with no discernable secondary concern, is their shareholders, which has made them incapable of covering our cost to do business with them. We cannot stay in business while maintaining partnerships with corporations that steadfastly refuse to cover costs that they have created.

This is a snippet of communication that we sent to UHC on 6/18/2024 asking for a contract extension so that our patients could be properly notified if necessary as we were actively in negotiations.

“Rheumatology Associates provided United Healthcare with a termination letter dated March 28, 2024, pursuant to the terms of our agreement. With that date just 12 days from now, it appears that UHC might not have gotten notification to their members (our patients) that they will be losing their in-network coverage with their doctor. We estimate that this would affect approximately 1,500 patients if not more, who would have trouble transitioning their care to another provider for months.

For many of these patients, the absence of the care and treatment that puts their disease in remission could result in emergency care and physical regression resulting in disability or worse. Rheumatology Associates has been caring for people from all corners of the state for 48 years this July 1st. We know this area of medicine well and care deeply for the community and our patients. We believe that if you were able to be face to face with these patients like we are every day, it would help you better understand why we are so passionate about their care.

We withheld notifying your members out of respect for the negotiation process. We are interested in actively continuing negotiations and would like to extend the termination period from July 1, 2024, to August 30, 2024, to allow us additional time to complete negotiations and provide proper notice to affected members should that need arise.”

On 6/25/2024, a week after we requested an extension, we were told that United Healthcare would not agree to an extension and that our counter proposal will be sent to “analytics” for review. We are not hopeful that we will be able to reach an agreement with them at this time.

We encourage all Medicare Advantage plan patients to file a formal complaint against United Healthcare because we feel that they did not provide a timely proper notification to their members as is required by law. Our office will also be filing complaints with CMS and other regulatory agencies as appropriate. You can find out more information by visiting <https://www.medicare.gov/claims-appeals/how-to-file-a-complaint-grievance> Click on “your health or drug plan” in the middle of the page, then click on “file a complaint”. There you will find an electronic form to complete. Alternatively, you may call 1-800-MEDICARE

At Rheumatology Associates our focus on treating our patients and their families with dignity and personalized care has not changed. We have worked very hard to ensure that our practice is a place where our patients cannot only be placed on the road to recovery but can be accompanied during the entire journey by the same dedicated staff. We offer comprehensive treatment to ensure that our patients get seamless care from start to finish. It would appear from United’s actions that they do not truly value the benefits this provides their members. Sadly, United has refused to draft an acceptable agreement with our practice, and we refuse to provide our patients with anything less than exceptional care. The current situation with United does not have to affect you indefinitely. You or your employer may have other options when choosing your health insurance for next year. If you are not self-employed, speak with a human resource representative or another healthcare decision maker at your workplace about alternatives to United. In cases where your plan is “self-funded”, your employer may choose to simply instruct United to pay your claims as if Rheumatology Associates were in-network.

If your plan has out of network benefits as PPO plans generally do, you can remain in our practice if you choose. If your plan does not have out of network benefits or you wish to transition to another provider in United Healthcare's network, please contact UHC to ask which in network Rheumatologists would be covered under your plan. Once you determine whom you would like to see, please let our office know and we will send your medical records to them.

Please be aware that seeing out of network patients is at the sole discretion of Rheumatology Associates, P.C. and is subject to change. It is largely contingent upon how your insurance carrier behaves. Since we began contract negotiations with UHC, we have seen a dramatic increase in prepayment requests for medical records to process claims where there previously were none, we continue to receive denials for "non-approved services" when we do in fact have a written authorization on file, we began receiving incorrect denials for our lab services that we are still trying to recoup funds on, and recently we were unable to access their portal that is used to complete day to day business with their company, this is something we had never experienced prior to these recent negotiations. Please note that even out of network providers are allowed access to their portal. We urge you to please contact United Healthcare, your employer and/or Medicare and complain.

Sincerely,

The Physicians at Rheumatology Associates, P.C.