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NEW PUBLIC HEALTH STRATEGY ADDRESSING ARTHRITIS

Arthritis Foundation and DOH Join Together to Address Pennsylvania's Leading Cause of Disability

(April 28, 2003) – A statewide coalition of key leaders in the fields of arthritis and public health are joining forces to address arthritis – the nation's leading cause of disability - with the development of a formal plan. This effort signals a shift toward a new public health strategy – one focusing on chronic diseases that impact quality of life.

The Arthritis Foundation and the Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) have joined forces, along with over 60 representatives from academic health centers, managed care organizations, physicians, health care professional associations, rehabilitation centers, community organizations, voluntary health organizations, legislators, and people with arthritis, to develop the *Pennsylvania Arthritis Action Plan* (PAAP). The Plan is a comprehensive, systematic public health approach to reduce the arthritis burden throughout Pennsylvania and officially released in Harrisburg on April 28, 2003.

“The Plan will alert Pennsylvanians, legislators and community leaders of the fact that arthritis *is* a serious health problem and not simply a natural part of aging. The Plan emphasizes the importance of early diagnosis and appropriate management, including exercise and weight control, to reduce pain and the risk of disability,” says Mike Silver, Esquire, chair, the Arthritis Foundation-Eastern Pennsylvania Chapter Board of Directors.

At least one in three, or over three million, Pennsylvania adults have arthritis or chronic joint symptoms. Half of these adults are under the age of 65 and one third are limited in their ability to perform some daily functions. As the leading cause of disability in the United States, nearly 70 million adult Americans are affected by arthritis or chronic joint symptoms. Arthritis and rheumatic diseases cost the United States nearly \$124.8 billion annually. Arthritis is an ageless disease. Over 3,000 Pennsylvania children have a medical diagnosis of arthritis.

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The Arthritis Foundation and DOH recognize the need to combine efforts to address the arthritis burden. The DOH is involved for three key reasons: arthritis has a high prevalence, exerts a high social and economic impact both physically and economically, and there are effective interventions that are underutilized.

“We recognize arthritis as a serious health issue with a growth in the number of people affected. Now is the time to address arthritis as a public health issue. A new approach is needed, and this Plan will lead the way,” says Steven Seitchik, Arthritis Program Manager, Pennsylvania Department of Health.

The current approach toward arthritis management is a patient-focused, one-on-one medical model, tracking the disease after disability has occurred. The public health approach emphasizes a population approach and prevention measures, with the goal of decreasing the likelihood that someone will develop arthritis or a related disability.

A key component of a public health approach is the concept of *prevention* measures. These prevention measures increase the quality of life for people with arthritis, including decreasing pain and disability, and improving physical, psychosocial and work function. The Plan proposes to do this by increasing: (1) awareness of the symptoms of arthritis and need for early diagnosis and (2) the practice of appropriate management (including self-management) behaviors.

The overall goal of PAAP is to reduce the burden of arthritis and its impact on individuals and on Pennsylvania’s economy and includes the following:

- Increase public awareness of arthritis as the leading cause of disability and an important public health problem;
- Prevent arthritis whenever possible;
- Promote early diagnosis and appropriate management for people with arthritis to ensure them the maximum number of years of healthy life;
- Minimize preventable pain and disability due to arthritis;
- Support people with arthritis to access the resources they need to cope with their disease;
- Ensure that people with arthritis receive the family, peer and community support they need.

By implementing this plan, the Arthritis Foundation and DOH will be able to improve the quality of life for adults and children who are so deeply affected by arthritis and begin to address the unique needs of populations disproportionately burdened by arthritis. By forming partnerships with consumers, health care providers, advocates and private industry, we are able to positively impact the lives of people with arthritis.

The Arthritis Foundation is the only nationwide, nonprofit voluntary health organization helping people take greater control of arthritis by leading efforts to prevent, control and cure arthritis and related diseases. Throughout the three Pennsylvania chapters and branch offices, the Arthritis Foundation provides a large number of community-based services to make life with arthritis easier and less painful. The mission of the Pennsylvania Department of Health is to promote physical and mental health and to prevent disease, injury and disability. The Department provides funding to the Arthritis Foundation Chapters in Pennsylvania for education and prevention initiatives.

More information about the Pennsylvania Arthritis Action Plan can be obtained by contacting any one of the three Arthritis Foundation Chapters in Pennsylvania.

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