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January 23, 2009

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama:

The Association of Professional Behavior Analysts (APBA) roundly applauds your emphasis on scientific evidence as the basis for policymaking in several important arenas. It is our hope that your administration will foster a renaissance in scientific research and science education in America. We are especially pleased that you intend to initiate federal legislation to mandate health insurance coverage of science-based treatments for autism spectrum disorders (ASD), including applied behavior analysis. Many of the 7,000 professional behavior analysts we represent provide services to many thousands of American with ASD and their families. Others are involved in conducting research on those disorders and effective treatments for them. We would like to take this opportunity to offer our expertise and resources to assist your administration in its efforts to improve health care, education, and other services to people with ASD.

Like you, we believe that a key to improving health care and education lies in reducing wasteful spending and focusing on cost-effectiveness. One way to do that is to get the health care and education systems to stop spending money on behavioral health and educational interventions that have proved ineffective or harmful in methodologically sound studies, or have not been evaluated scientifically. We have been gratified to see that some of the people you have selected for leadership positions in those systems have a strong commitment to scientific research.

We understand that you may be considering Dr. Sanjay Gupta for Surgeon General. As an organization that strongly supports evidence-based practice, we would like to bring to your attention some concerns regarding Dr. Gupta's potential nomination. Unfortunately, he has endorsed several medical and educational interventions that are not supported by scientific evidence, and some that have proved harmful. One such intervention is Facilitated Communication (FC), which is used with many people with ASD and related disorders. The claim that this technique is a miraculous new method of communication has not been proved in a single well-designed study during the 30 years it has been promoted. Instead, scores of properly

controlled studies have shown that FC deprives people with disabilities of opportunities to communicate for themselves. It is estimated that millions of hours and dollars have been wasted because thousands of schools and programs serving people with ASD and other disorders have adopted FC instead of scientifically proven methods for teaching communication skills.

In his reporting about FC, Dr. Gupta has consistently rejected the scientific evidence of the harms of this technique in favor of testimonials and stories from people who believe it is valid, but can provide no objective evidence to back up that claim. His endorsement of FC contradicts statements by several professional organizations that the technique has no scientific validity or reliability and should not be used. They include the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association, American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Association for Behavior Analysis, and Commission for Scientific Medicine and Mental Health, among others.

The next Surgeon General will be in a position to influence Americans' decisions about health care, and perhaps to influence health care policy substantially. We believe that person could serve a vital function by educating citizens about the importance of scientific research, and by helping them distinguish scientifically validated, effective treatments from unproven and harmful ones. We urge you to impress upon the Surgeon General, whether that person is Dr. Gupta or some other qualified individual, the importance of advocating for an evidence-based approach to treatment.

Sincerely yours,

Gina Green, PhD, BCBA, Executive Director  
Jon S. Bailey, PhD, BCBA, President