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PATIENTS' ACCESS TO HEART AND LUNG SURGERY THREATENED

Washington, D.C., April 3, 2003 -- Findings released today from a joint survey sponsored by the American Medical Association (AMA) and The Society of Thoracic Surgeons (STS) confirm that medical liability premiums for cardiothoracic surgeons continue to rise at an alarming rate. In some states, a heart surgeon's professional liability expenses now exceed \$100,000 per year. Moreover, these skyrocketing premiums, which have almost doubled between 2001 and 2003, are threatening to have an impact on delivery of care.

Cardiothoracic surgeons, who perform heart, lung cancer, esophageal and other critical chest surgeries, are increasingly closing their practices, ceasing to provide high-risk services, or relocating to states with less punitive medical liability rates. Over 30 percent of those cardiothoracic surgeons responding to the survey had either relocated, closed their practices, or stopped providing high-risk services, most often citing increased liability costs for their decisions.

"When surgeons are forced to leave a community because of exorbitant insurance premiums, it will be the patients who suffer," according to Robert E. Guyton, a cardiothoracic surgeon at Emory University who is president of the Society. "Access to care *must* be a fundamental patient right."

These survey results are especially disconcerting given study results published in August 2002 that found the number of heart surgeons entering training likely to be insufficient to replace those who will retire. Financial considerations inevitably influence young physicians' interest in residency training in cardiothoracic surgery, which requires an additional seven to ten years of training after medical school. . Not only are medical liability premiums increasing dramatically, but Medicare reimbursement rates have declined sharply.

"Cardiothoracic surgical procedures are very difficult and time-consuming," said Dr. Guyton. "If we are to have an adequate number of surgeons to fill the needs of an aging population, young physicians considering cardiothoracic surgery as a specialty must know that surgical reimbursement and liability insurance premiums will be fair."

"The STS is encouraged by passage of the HEALTH Act of 2003 by the U.S. House of Representatives in March," said John Mayer, M.D., a pediatric heart surgeon at Boston Children's Hospital. "We are hopeful that the Senate will safeguard patients' access to care by moving quickly to pass medical liability reform legislation."

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The Society of Thoracic Surgeons represents surgeons in the US and around the world who provide heart, lung, esophageal, and other chest surgery. The Society is committed to saving, extending and improving the quality of the lives of the patients it serves.