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**Alabama Physician Accepts Grant Intended to Improve Pregnancy Outcomes
for Rural Women**

Dr. Lorie Harper Will Use Telemedicine to Address the Opioid Epidemic in Pregnant Women

Washington DC, February 20, 2018 – The Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine (SMFM) today presented the first-ever SMFM-Aetna Health Policy Award to Lorie Harper, MD, MSCI, for her research proposal entitled, “Telemedicine to Provide Opiate Agonist Therapy in Pregnancy.” Dr. Harper is maternal-fetal medicine specialist and an associate professor at the University of Alabama Birmingham.

The opioid epidemic is a public health emergency that disproportionately impacts rural women and their families. Substance use during pregnancy, particularly the use of opioids, has dramatically increased in the last decade and is associated with poor birth outcomes. Together with the Department of Public Health in Alabama, Dr. Harper and her team will investigate the use of telemedicine to treat pregnant women opioid use disorders.

Opioid agonist therapy (OAT) is the standard of care for treating opioid use disorders in pregnancy. During pregnancy, OAT is associated with increased participation in prenatal care, decreased relapse during pregnancy, and improved outcomes for women and newborns. However, OAT is not always available in rural areas and women in rural areas may face barriers to accessing OAT (e.g. lack of transportation). Dr. Harper will conduct a pilot study to compare the effectiveness of delivering OAT in-person versus via telemedicine. Telemedicine offers real time, two-way video and audio conferencing with Bluetooth stethoscopes and hand-held exam cameras to enable providers to examine patients.

“Dr. Harper’s research seeks to improve birth outcomes and reduce health disparities,” said the Chair of SMFM’s Health Policy and Advocacy Committee, George Saade, MD. “SMFM is grateful for Aetna’s support of this award and excited to see the potential impact this research has on access to care.” SMFM will use the results of this study to propose novel approaches to improve the outcomes of pregnancies in women with opioid use disorders.

“Aetna is proud to support this important study, which will help advance treatment of opioid use disorder in pregnant women. Telemedicine is a promising approach in advancing health equity,” said Dr. Dan Knecht, Vice President of Clinical Strategy and Policy at Aetna.

SMFM recently expanded its work to address the opioid epidemic in the pregnant population. In January 2018, the [organization partnered with other national leaders](#) in obstetric care and addiction medicine to identify gaps in research, barriers to access, and pain management strategies during pregnancy and the immediate postpartum period. A summary of this work will be published in *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* (AJOG).

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About SMFM

The Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine (est. 1977) is a non-profit membership organization representing the interests of obstetricians/gynecologists who have additional formal education in maternal-fetal medicine. The Society is devoted to reducing high-risk pregnancy complications by providing continuing education to its more than 2,000 members on the latest pregnancy assessment and treatment methods. It also serves as an advocate for improving public policy and expanding research funding and opportunities for maternal-fetal medicine. SMFM hosts an annual scientific meeting in which new ideas and research in the area of maternal-fetal medicine are unveiled and discussed. For more information, visit www.smfm.org.