

Aetna to Stop Paying for Some Inpatient Errors

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER
New York Bureau

In a move that could have significant implications for physicians and hospitals, the insurer Aetna has said it will not pay its network hospitals for care necessitated by certain preventable errors.

The announcement follows a policy shift by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, which has finalized plans to stop paying for eight preventable events as of October 2008.

Aetna Inc. has incorporated language into its hospital contracts that calls for waiving all costs related to a number of serious reportable events. The language comes from the Leapfrog Group's "never-events" policy, which includes a list of 28 events considered so harmful that they should never occur. The list, compiled by the National Quality Forum (NQF), comprises events ranging from surgery performed on the wrong body part or on the wrong patient, to stage III or IV pressure ulcers acquired after admission to a health care facility.

The policy instructs hospitals to report errors within 10 days to the Joint Commission, state reporting programs, or patient safety organizations.

Hospitals also are asked to take action to prevent future events and to apologize to the patient or family affected by the er-

ror. Aetna is the first health plan to endorse the Leapfrog policy.

"The major goal here is to get hospitals to focus on having the systems in place to prevent these events from happening," said Dr. Charles Cutler, Aetna's national medical director.

Adopting the Leapfrog Group's never-events policy is not about saving money, Dr. Cutler said. In fact, many of the never events carry no additional cost. Instead, Aetna is seeking to send a consistent message to hospitals about quality, he said. "The intent here is not to be punitive."

But the Aetna announcement has encountered some skepticism from the physician community.

The NQF list of never events is much broader than the eight preventable events selected under the Medicare policy, said Cynthia Brown, director of the division of advocacy and health policy at the American College of Surgeons (ACS). One reason that many of those events were not included on Medicare's list is that they are difficult to measure with the current coding system, she said.

Another problem with the Aetna approach is that it's hard to affix blame to a hospital or a particular physician, Ms. Brown said.

"If there's a problem with blood incompatibility, is it the surgeon's fault?" she

asked. "It's hard to know how it's going to be operationalized."

When used properly, the NQF never-events list protects patients and directs a patient environment enriched with safety and quality, said Dr. Frank Opelka, chair of the ACS Committee on Patient Safety and Quality Improvement. But he cautioned that if payers drift from the intentions of the NQF never events, the specifications could be lost and overreporting could create unintended consequences.

For example, because of hospital overcrowding and limited resources in a rural environment, a frail patient may be admitted despite the lack of health care resources. If the patient has a pressure ulcer that progresses from a stage II on admission to a stage III, this should not be considered an NQF never event, he said.

Dr. Opelka also questioned whether hospitals would continue to report these

types of serious preventable errors if they aren't being paid for the care. "If the reports are generated from a hospital claims system and the payer no longer recognizes the events as payable, isn't the message to stop reporting rather than to prevent the never events?" asked Dr. Opelka, also vice chancellor for clinical affairs at Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, New Orleans.

The policy is likely to affect all of Aetna's network hospitals over the next 3 years as the company renegotiates its contracts, Dr. Cutler said.

Since Medicare announced its policy shift last summer, other insurers have considered changes to their policies. Officials at Cigna, for example, are evaluating how to implement a similar policy within their hospital network. Cigna plans to have a national policy in place by October 2008, spokesman Mark Slitt said. ■

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UPCOMING MEETINGS

Canadian Rheumatology Association

American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons

Central Surgical Association

International Society for Clinical Densitometry

American Psychosomatic Society

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, & Immunology

American Society for Adolescent Psychiatry

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INDICATIONS

Cleanliness, Godliness, Psychosis

The Bureau of Indications' Nana Napoli recommends a cold shower and a clean colon before first dates and Sunday dinner, respectively. But an article in a recent issue of *Medical Hypotheses* proposed that these two low-cost practices could have even greater effects as treatments for psychosis. Cold showers send a "tremendous amount" of electrical impulses from the nerves to the brain, according to the investigator. "A cold shower ... also can result in significant analgesia, possibly due to a several-fold increase in the blood level of β -endorphin." As for the colon cleansing, the author writes that concentrated colon bacteria can cause a buildup of brain-altering, psychosis-promoting toxins. ... Ah, yes, we can see it now: Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears showing up to the Grammy Awards after-party not with red-rimmed eyes, but with raw skin from heavy showering and reeking of Herbal Essences. As for the colon cleansing, "If there is a concern about potential development of dependence on laxatives, in the author's experience, they could be replaced with massage and careful torso-bending exercises." We'll stick with the lobotomy, thanks.

Tiptoe Through the Tulips

Retired Dutch gardeners who use electric lawn mowers and hedge trimmers regard

wearing wooden shoes while operating the machines as being a particularly good method of ensuring safety, researchers concluded in a groundbreaking (pun intended) study. The researchers, whose data were published in the journal *Safety Science*, also found the gardeners had some trouble reading the warning symbols displayed on the devices. There was a picture of a book (meaning "read the instruction manual"), an exclamation point in a triangle (meaning "caution") and a fluffy cloud with rain coming down, in a crossed-out "No Rain Cloud" circle, which participants took to mean either as a warning against using the device near a pool or a "don't mow upside down grass" symbol. One participant, whose "complicatedly shaped shrubs" made trimming very difficult, explained that the greatest danger was that the power cord might trip him up. Said the gardener/participant: "Ja, is het gevaarlijk. Maar de 6-metre giraf-vormige struik zal zich niet in orde maken." ("Eet's dangerous, ja. But zat 20-foot giraffe-shape shrub will not trim eet-self." English translation ours.) "Findings from this field study may provide leads for designers to improve the safety of powered gardening tools," the authors concluded. Participants were thanked for their time with a gift certificate to a local gardening shop. Lawsuits filed by the two retirees who subsequently trimmed off their wooden shoes are pending.

We Still Love You, Angelina Jolie!

Tattooed women are perceived as being more promiscuous and heavier drinkers than their tattoo-naive counterparts, reported researchers in the journal *Body Image*. A highly sophisticated study used Microsoft Paint to create several simple female caricatures, each identical except for yellow or brown hair, with zero, one, two, or three tattoos drawn on the ankle, arm, and/or hip. "Only figures of women were used because no comparable stimulus set for men was available," they wrote, referring to the well-known international doctrine that no drawings of male forms ever be created in Microsoft Paint. The images were then shown to 160 undergraduates, who guessed that the figure of a woman with zero tattoos would consume a mean of four alcohol units on a typical night, vs. eight units for a woman with three tattoos. They also guessed the woman with three tattoos was more promiscuous than the woman with none. "The repeated measures design of the present study ... may have rendered the body art manipulation obvious to participants, thus potentially biasing the results," the authors wrote. "Clearly, not all women who have tattoos are heavy drinkers, and some may even be teetotalers." Like the twice-tattooed Lindsay Lohan, for instance. Errr ...

Buzz Kill

In the interest of comprehensive, simplified medical news journalism, we would

like to present a summary of the health effects of caffeine, as reported recently at various medical meetings and in several journals. First: Don't drink caffeine if you're pregnant, as a study in the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* tied it to an increased risk of miscarriage. But do drink up if you want to become pregnant, as the journal *Cancer* reports that caffeine lowers the risk of ovarian cancer. On the other hand, too much can contribute to the development of osteoporosis, according to the University of Maryland Medical Center, Baltimore. But a report in *Neuroscience* says you should drink coffee to keep Alzheimer's away. Then again, Duke University, Durham, N.C., researchers have also said caffeine may promote the development of type 2 diabetes. But who cares about diabetes when caffeine also can help prevent skin cancer, according to a study in the *National Academy of Sciences*? Indeed, caffeine (and smoking) also protect against Parkinson's disease, according to research in the *Archives of Neurology*. But not too much: Excessive caffeine may worsen restless legs syndrome, says one physician at the University of Miami. Of course, it can also lower your gout risk, as explained in the journal *Arthritis and Rheumatism*. Now you should feel totally comfortable recommending a few daily cuppas to your patients... or not. Glad to be of help!

—Denise Napoli