Policy & Practice

Bill to Thwart Medicare Cuts

A bipartisan bill (H.R. 2356) introduced by Rep. Clay Shaw (R-Fla.) and Rep. Ben Cardin (D-Md.) seeks to halt impending cuts to Medicare physician payments and replace the flawed formula that determines those payments. Following up on a recommendation of the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission, the bill would increase payments by no less than 2.7% in 2006. It would also repeal the sustainable growth rate adjustment, replacing it with a method "that ensures adequate and appropriate payments as well as stable updates for Medicare providers," Rep. Cardin said in a statement. Physicians face a 4.3% cut in Medicare payments in 2006 and subsequent cuts totaling 30% from 2007 to 2012 if the formula isn't fixed. The bill was referred to the House Ways and Means and Energy and Commerce committees. A similar bill introduced in the Senate (S. 1081) would provide a positive update to Medicare payments for 2 years.

Weight Loss Surgery Coverage

The American Society for Bariatric Surgery (ASBS) is asking the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to provide coverage for bariatric surgery in an effort to improve access for Medicare beneficiaries. Obesity is significantly associated with 5 of the top 10 self-reported health conditions of Medicare beneficiaries, the group wrote in its request to CMS, which currently covers gastric bypass surgery if it is medically appropriate and if it is used to correct an illness that caused the obesity or was aggravated by it. ASBS is asking CMS to expand its coverage to include laparoscopic procedures. ASBS also pointed to the Medicare Coverage Advisory Committee's favorable vote on the safety and efficacy of bariatric surgery for severely obese patients.

Smoking Rates Decline

The percentage of U.S. adults who smoke cigarettes continues to decline, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 21.6% of U.S. adults are current smokers, which is a drop from the 22.5% who were smokers in 2002 and the 22.8% in 2001, according to data from the 2003 National Health Interview Survey. And for a second straight year, the number of people who have quit smoking—about 46 million—outnumber the 45 million who continue to smoke. The study, which was published in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, also noted that more interventions are needed to help address the remaining disparities in smoking by age, race and ethnicity, and educational levels.

Healthy Eating

Tweens can improve their eating habits if given the right education, according to a study in the June issue of Pediatrics. The study found that children aged 8-10 years who had attended a behavior-oriented nutrition education program and were taught to follow a specific diet adopted better eating habits over several years than children who received only general nutrition information. The results are based on a review of dietary recalls from 595 children aged 8-10 who had high blood cholesterol levels at the start of the study. "These new findings offer valuable lessons for finding effective ways to help children develop healthier eating habits—a critical need in light of the rising rates of obesity and related conditions among children," said Elizabeth G. Nabel, M.D., director of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, which sponsored the study.

Medicaid Commission

To strengthen Medicaid, the Department of Health and Human Services established an advisory commission to identify reforms necessary to stabilize the program. The commission must submit two reports to HHS Secretary Mike Leavitt. The first, due Sept. 1, will outline recommendations for Medicaid to save $10 billion over the next 5 years, targeting potential long-term enhancements and performance goals. The second, due Dec. 31, 2006, will make recommendations to help ensure Medicaid's long-term sustainability. Secretary Leavitt plans to appoint up to 15 voting members to the commission with expertise in health care policy, finance, or administration.

Studies on Gender Differences Stalled

Research into gender differences is receiving limited funding at the National Institutes of Health, said the Society for Women's Health Research (SWHR). Grants awarded to study gender differences make up only a small percentage of of NIH grants, and in 2000-2003, none of the NIH institutes had devoted more than 8% of its funded grants to such research. Also during that time, an average of just 3% of grants focused on gender differences, according to an SWHR report. SWHR officials said they had hoped to see increasing levels of funding into gender differences, but they are encouraged that some NIH institutes have established mechanisms to foster this research.

—Mary Ellen Schneider