Respiratory Therapy Bill Affects MD Supervision

BY DENISE NAPOLI

Newly introduced federal legislation would allow registered respiratory therapists to provide services such as smoking cessation, asthma management, and inhaler training to patients without direct on-site supervision by a physician.

A previous version of the bill was introduced in 2007, but the legislation stalled in a House subcommittee and never came to a vote.

The Medicare Respiratory Therapy Initiative Act of 2009 (*S. 343*) would give patients increased access to treatment, explained two of the bill's cosponsors, Sen. Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.) and Sen. Mike Crapo (R-Idaho). "This access will be very beneficial to the people of Idaho, many of whom live in rural areas, to get the proper health care they need with the expenses being covered by Medicare," Sen. Crapo said in a statement.

Under current law, registered respiratory therapists (RRTs), who have a bachelor's degree but no medical school training, may provide services to patients only under the direct, on-site supervision of a physician. The new legislation would amend that to allow "general" physician supervision, such that a physician would need to be available to the RRT and patient during care, but not necessarily physically present on-site.

It's too early to tell whether the bill will meet with success this time around, said Lynne Marcus, vice president of health affairs at the American College of Chest Physicians. However, she hopes it will at least call attention to the need for increased access. "We want to support the better utilization of nonphysician providers," she said. ■