

Medicare RAC Program Seeks to Recoup Losses

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER

LAS VEGAS — The federal government is stepping up its audit activities in Medicare, and that could mean greater scrutiny of billing practices.

One development that physicians should keep a close eye on is the recent nationwide rollout of Medicare's Recovery Audit Contractor program, said Edward R. Gaines III, vice president and chief compliance officer at CBIZ Medical Management Professionals Inc.

The program, which is known as the RAC, began as a demonstration project

in New York, California, and Florida.

Under the program, private contractors are given contingency fees for identifying improper Medicare payments to health care providers, including over- and underpayments.

But Mr. Gaines said that the experience in the demonstration project showed that the contractors concentrated much more on detecting overpayments made to providers.

Now that the RAC program has been rolled out nationwide, four private contractors, each assigned to different regions of the country, will use data min-

ing, outlier analysis, and referrals to root out improper payments. The RAC contractors will earn contingency fees for finding errors, with fees that vary from around 9% to 12%.

Physicians need to be aware of the RAC activities and do their own outlier analyses so they can be ready to defend against an audit, Mr. Gaines advised during a meeting on reimbursement sponsored by the American College of Emergency Physicians.

The RACs will look at evaluation and management services. During the demonstration project, evaluation and

management services were exempt from audit, but that is not the case now that the RAC is a permanent program.

Medicare is raising the bar for audits because the program is in a financial squeeze, Mr. Gaines said.

Right now, Medicare receives more than 1.2 billion medical claims a year—and that's before the bulk of the baby boomer generation has entered the program. Add to that recent news reports that the Medicare and Medicaid programs are hemorrhaging tens of billions of dollars to fraud, and the federal government is in a position in which

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