Feds Release Final Meaningful Use Standards

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER

The federal government has released the much-anticipated requirements for how physicians and hospitals can qualify for tens of thousands of dollars in incentive payments to adopt and use electronic health records.

The final rule on the meaningful use of electronic health records (EHRs) eases many of the requirements that officials in the Health and Human Services department had outlined in a proposal published in January. Physician organizations had objected to the initial proposal, saying that it asked doctors to do too much too quickly.

Physicians were also critical of the all or nothing framework of the proposal, which required them to meet all 25 objectives for meaningful use or lose out on incentive payments.

Federal officials aimed to address those concerns in the final rule by requiring physicians to first meet a core set of 15 requirements and then meet any 5 of 10 additional requirements. The core set includes requirements such as recording patient demographics and vital signs in the EHR and maintaining an up-to-date problem list and an active list of medications and allergies.

"We very much want well-intentioned providers to become meaningful users," Dr. David Blumenthal, National Coordinator for Health Information Technology at HHS, said during a press briefing to announce the final rule.

HHS officials also relaxed some of the thresholds related to the requirements. For example, under the proposed rule, physicians would have had to generate and transmit 75% of their permissible prescriptions electronically to meet the e-prescribing requirement. Under the final rule, the threshold has been lowered to more than 40% of permissible prescriptions, Dr. Blumenthal said.

The final rule also creates an easier path for physicians to meet meaningful use requirements on electronic reporting of quality data. Under the final rule, physicians will need to report data on blood pressure, tobacco status, and adult weight screening, and follow-up in 2011 and 2012, in order to qualify.

The final rule outlines steps physicians must take in 2011 and 2012 to quality for the maximum incentive payments through Medicare and Medicaid. The incentives were mandated by the Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health Act (HITECH), a part of 2009's American Recovery Act.

Starting in 2011, physicians who show meaningful use of certified EHRs can receive payments of up to $18,000 from Medicare. Those bonuses continue for 5 years, with physicians eligible to earn up to $44,000 in total incentives. ■

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