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**Contact:** Amy Murphy

ACC Media Relations

amurphy@acc.org

202-375-6476

Larry Farnsworth

Crosby~Volmer International Communications

lfarnsworth@crosbyvolmer.com

202-232-6574

**CHICAGOLAND CARDIOLOGISTS WARN THAT MANY PRACTICES PLAN TO SCALE BACK OR ELIMINATE SERVICES DUE TO 2010 MEDICARE CUTS**

Chicago, IL – Chicago-area heart patients may have difficulty accessing vital cardiology screening tests beginning next year, in light of Medicare reimbursement cuts that are scheduled to take effect on Jan. 1, 2010.

Private-practice cardiologists from the South Side to the Northwest say that they will be forced to cut services such as nuclear stress tests, echocardiograms, and blood tests for patients taking blood thinners. Although patients may seek those services at area hospitals, they will almost certainly face delays getting care.

“Hospitals don’t have the capacity to absorb the amount of patients we handle, and it’s unrealistic to think that they can respond that quickly,” said Dr. John Giardina of DuPage Medical Group. With more than 280 physicians, the group is one of the largest physician-owned, multi-specialty groups in the Midwest.

As a result, “patients will face longer lines, resulting in people not being diagnosed in a timely fashion,” said Dr. Joseph Stella, a senior interventional cardiologist at Heart Care Centers of Illinois. The 25-physician practice serves about 100,000 out patients annually, in communities such as Blue Island and Chicago’s southwest suburbs.

With fewer facilities handling more patients for certain procedures, heart patients will experience reduced quality of care.

“These cuts clearly will affect how we practice. Unfortunately, the physician call back may be a thing of the past and the rushed office visit a reality of the future,” said Dr. Mark Ottolin, managing partner of Cardiovascular Consultants of Naperville. The practice serves about 10,000 patients annually, primarily from DuPage County.

Patients also will face higher out-of-pocket costs for services they receive at area hospitals instead of in physicians’ offices, because hospitals charge more for care.

According to area cardiologists, the majority of heart patients at many practices are seniors on Medicare. Many will not be able to afford the increased costs, and will find it difficult to travel farther than their local cardiologist’s office for

services. Ultimately, the frailest and sickest patients will suffer, and cardiologists say that overall patient outcomes may worsen.

“We will pay a price for this short-sighted thinking when mortality rates rise to past levels,” said Dr. Jerome L. Hines, president of the multi-site practice Illinois Heart and Vascular. Hines is also governor of the American College of Cardiology’s Illinois chapter.

With the exception of evaluation and management services, the Medicare cuts—which will be phased in over four years—will reduce reimbursements for nearly all services that cardiologists perform by 10 percent to more than 40 percent. The Medicare cuts are based on a survey that includes data from just 55 of the nearly 40,000 cardiovascular practices in the United States. The survey results were not validated by Medicare, as required.

The forthcoming payment cuts are in addition to others the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services has implemented across the past few years—cuts that have necessitated belt-tightening steps such as cut backs and salary freezes or reductions at many practices. For example, North Shore Cardiology Consultants in northwest Chicago recently cut salaries by 10% for all staff and expects to layoff between two and three employees early next year, said partner and interventional cardiologist Dr. Marc Tenzer. The practice has four cardiologists who see more than 300 patients from Cook, DuPage, and Lake Counties per week.

The pending cuts will result in more cutbacks at practices, according to Dr. Vincent Bufalino, president and CEO of Midwest Heart Specialists and the chair of the American College of Cardiology’s advocacy committee. “There are practices across the country that are going to feel the need to belt-tighten, which will result in decreased services and access,” he said.

Tenzer of North Shore Cardiology Consultants concluded, “The devastation to practicing physicians inflicted by the Medicare cuts is amplified by the parallel cuts that will inevitably come from the private insurance companies.”

Chicagoland practices warning of cutbacks to services in light of Medicare payment cuts include:

- Cardiovascular Consultants of Naperville
- DuPage Medical Group, multiple locations
- Heart Care Centers of Illinois, multiple locations
- Illinois Heart and Vascular, multiple locations
- Midwest Heart Specialists, Lombard
- North Shore Cardiology Consultants, Chicago

### **About the American College of Cardiology**

The American College of Cardiology is leading the way to optimal cardiovascular care and disease prevention. The College is a 37,000-member nonprofit medical society and bestows the credential Fellow of the American College of Cardiology upon physicians who meet its stringent qualifications. The College is a leader in the formulation of health policy, standards and guidelines, and is a staunch supporter of cardiovascular research. The ACC provides professional education and operates national registries for the measurement and improvement of quality care. More information about the association is available online at [www.acc.org](http://www.acc.org).

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