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MEDICARE CUTS CRIPPLE DELAWARE CARDIAC CARE

The First State's Two Largest Cardiology Practices May Have to Scale Back Services

Wilmington, DE – Heart patients in Delaware may soon have difficulty accessing vital cardiology diagnostic tests beginning next year in light of Medicare reimbursement cuts that are scheduled to take effect on January 1.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in 2010 will cut reimbursements to cardiologists by 10 percent to nearly 40 percent for services such as nuclear stress testing and echocardiograms, prompting cardiologists across the country to reexamine their practices and the services they offer their patients. Delaware physicians are no different.

The state's two largest cardiology practices, Cardiology Consultants and Cardiology Physicians, which care for more than 50,000 patients throughout Delaware, may be forced to trim back basic services their patients rely on every day.

“These cuts are a fool’s endeavor,” said Dr. Brian Sarter, president of Cardiology Physicians, a seven-physician practice with offices in North Wilmington and Newark. “Medical groups in Delaware, cardiologists included, are small businesses. We create jobs as well as treat patients. We’re going to be forced to make an awful lot of tough decisions. Ultimately, these cuts will shift costs to the elderly.

“And, there is a real chance that there is going to be a change in how care is delivered to Medicare patients.”

One of the services that Delaware’s largest practice Cardiology Consultants, is considering scaling back is a 24/7 angioplasty program at four of Delaware’s hospitals as part of which its physicians treat rural heart attack patients who are airlifted to one of the hospitals for immediate treatment. The program treats patients regardless of their ability to pay.

“It’s a phenomenal statewide, state-of-the-art service,” said Dr. George Moutsatsos, a practice partner. “But, it’s not tenable to provide these types of services without adequate funding.”

Moutsatsos said the 25-year-old practice, which has 11 offices throughout the state, may have to close some of its locations, particularly in rural areas of the state.

Sarter's practice, Cardiology Physicians, is considering trimming back its Coumadin clinic. Coumadin, a commonly-used drug to fight against blood clotting and often prescribed to heart disease patients who use defibrillators, must be monitored carefully with blood tests in order to prevent toxic effects. Coumadin toxicity is the third-leading cause of emergency room visits in the United States for drug poisoning. Many practices provide this service, to patients even though in many cases, the clinics do not generate revenue.

The impending cuts to Medicare reimbursements for private-practice cardiologists are separate from the overall health reform that is currently being debated on Capitol Hill that will reduce all physician reimbursements – regardless of specialty – by 22 percent next year. Additionally, the cuts are based on survey results that were not validated by Medicare and includes data from just 55 of the nearly 40,000 cardiovascular practices nationwide.

Moutsatsos warns that other services that some people take for granted might have to be rationed. For instance, Cardiology Consultants' standing rule to see patients the same day they call could be in jeopardy.

Additionally, both Cardiology Consultants and Cardiology Physicians are weighing whether or not they will continue providing patients assistance with nurse practitioners or nurse's assistants. As well, the triage departments, which patients can call to ask questions, get test results or do simple things such as fill prescriptions may too have to be cut as a result of these cuts.

“The victims in all of this are the patients, and nationwide, they're not being well represented by their legislators,” said Sarter. “Patients are protective of their relationships with their cardiologist. Especially those who saw us there at three in the morning saving them when they were having a heart attack.”

Moutsatsos adds: “We've provided a lot of cardiac care to Delaware and have never turned down an uninsured patient. But to maintain these types of free services, we need adequate reimbursements.”

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.

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