



**For Immediate Release**

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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

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

Fort Myers, Fla. – Heart patients in Fort Myers may have difficulty accessing timely vital cardiology diagnostic tests beginning next year, in light of Medicare reimbursement cuts that are scheduled to take effect on Jan. 1, 2010.

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

“The hospitals here are overburdened already,” said Dr. Brian Taschner of Coastal Cardiology, a four-physician practice that serves about 20,000 patients. Meanwhile, he adds that patient wait times for appointments may expand from about two weeks to between four and six weeks.

Dr. Murali Muppala, of Advanced Heart Center, adds, “I doubt hospitals will be able to accommodate the volume of patients that would need diagnostic tests if private-practice physicians cut back.” The four-physician practice serves more than 18,000 patients.

Despite advances in cardiovascular care that have helped reduce death and disability from heart disease, cardiologists fear that the cuts will ultimately worsen patient outcomes. “All the progress that we have made so far with appropriate testing and intervention—we’re going to fall back on it,” said Dr. Muppala.

With fewer facilities handling more patients for certain procedures and facilities cutting back on practice expenses in light of the impending Medicare cuts and previous reimbursement reductions, heart patients may experience reduced quality of care.

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 will not be able to afford the increased costs. Ultimately, the frailest and sickest patients will suffer, and cardiologists say that overall patient outcomes may worsen.

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 at many practices.

In October, the 17-physician Florida Heart Associates laid off 15% of its workforce in coding, claims processing, authorizations, medical records, front office, lipid clinic, and research positions. The practice this year also reduced overhead costs by 11% with cuts to housekeeping, landscaping, and maintenance services, among other areas. Florida Heart also eliminated a live switchboard operator in favor of a lower-cost automatic switchboard.

“For us, this was like taking it to the bone,” said administrator G. Phillip Lotti. “Now the challenge is keeping patients satisfied.” Although the practice has not had to make staff cuts involving its nurses or physicians, patients are experiencing inconveniences such as telephone waits and referrals to laboratories for tests that used to be provided in house.

Commenting on the impact of the impending reductions to Medicare reimbursements for cardiology services, Dr. Alberto Montalvo, the president of the Florida Chapter of the American College of Cardiology, warns that “Such drastic cuts will not allow for practices to survive.”

Muppala adds that the cuts will drive many physicians to retire early and “it’s going to be impossible to recruit cardiologists to this area.”

Lotti urges patients to contact their legislators about the cuts. “With help from patients, perhaps our legislators will act to stop these draconian cuts and enable private-practice cardiologists to continue providing the best care for patients.”

Practices in the Fort Myers area that are warning of cutbacks to services in light of Medicare payment cuts include:

- Advanced Heart Center in Fort Myers
- Coastal Cardiology in Fort Myers
- Florida Heart Associates in Fort Myers and Cape Coral

### **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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