

Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home

A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon RN, BSN

Raise Your Voice: Support Congressman McGovern's Effort to Prevent Medicare Payment Cuts

Folks, I've been in the home health care industry for a long time. During my years of serving many individuals in their own homes, I've concluded that my highest priority is to provide those in my care with the best possible service.

That seems pretty obvious, right? I mean, that's what everyone in this industry *should* do. But as we've all learned in our lives, just because we *should* do something doesn't mean we actually do it...

It appears the government has caught on to some industry providers not doing what they should. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) believes that some home health agencies are "rigging the system" to receive higher Medicare payments by claiming that their patients have conditions of higher clinical severity than they actually have.

CMS believes the system can be "rigged" and in response, plans to implement as of January 1, 2008 payment rate cuts totaling 11.75% over five years for Medicare home health services. The provision would reduce home health outlays by \$6.03 billion.

I'm suspicious because CMS hasn't publicized any of the details on the research method, data and findings they used to justify the planned cuts—so it's impossible for Congress or the public to evaluate the reliability or validity of its actions.

These unprecedented cuts will end access to valuable home health services in many parts of the country since more than 50% of home health agencies nationwide project that—with the reduced payment rates—they won't be able to cover the cost of care.

The ultimate effect of these payment cuts will be the loss of home health services in many parts of the country, leaving patients with no alternatives for post-acute and long-term care other than more costly institutional care.

Fortunately, our good Congressman Jim McGovern has with Walter Jones, Jr. (NC) cosponsored a bipartisan bill (H.R. 3865, the "Home Health Care Access Protection Act of 2007") that would block implementation of this rate reduction and establish a new process and criteria for evaluating patient cases.

I spoke with Congressman McGovern's office to learn why he cosponsored this bill. He said: "I have been a strong supporter of home health care services during my time in Congress, and I am proud to introduce this legislation. Making further, deep cuts in home health care services is not just wrong, it's bad fiscal policy".

"We know that home health care is a cost-effective, compassionate way to deliver high-quality services. The CMS proposal makes no sense, and I look forward to working with my colleagues to move our legislation through the Congress."

The Home Care Alliance of Massachusetts—of which my company is a member—has asked us to get as much support as possible for this bill. I'm asking you to help prevent efforts to reduce home health and hospice payments by contacting Congressman McGovern's office to thank him for taking the lead on this issue: To do so, just email his Legislative Assistant, Lisa Salerno, at Lisa.Salerno@mail.house.gov

Remember, the essence of home health care is to provide individuals, families and loved ones with services that promote maximum comfort and independence in the home.

Kimberly Harmon is the Founder & CEO for Harmon Home Health, Inc. She may be reached at kharmon@harmonhomecare.com or 508-791-5600, and welcomes any questions, comments or concerns about any specific health issues you have.

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