

Educating Seniors: Bring Your Health... Home

A Monthly Column by Kimberly Harmon RN, BSN

Actions on Capitol Hill Could Affect Your Access to Home Health Care

Normally I stay away from politics. I prefer the familiar landscape of home health care. Personally, I'm frustrated that politics and home health care are increasingly linked, but with so much money involved in the latter, I suppose it's inevitable. And we need to deal with the inevitable. Burying our heads in the sand won't make the problem go away. That's why in this column you'll read about a recent development down in D.C. that links these two issues in a way that could affect the home health care you receive in the future.

The development to which I refer is a draft SCHIP (State Children's Health Insurance Program)/Medicare package that the U.S. House Ways & Means Committee is currently considering.

Late last month the Home Care Alliance of Massachusetts—an organization with whom I am involved—sent to its members some important information about this draft package. I'm sharing this information with you because the contents of the package may affect you down the road.

Basically, the draft package includes a one-year freeze on the home health market "basket" for calendar year 2008 and a two-year 5 percent add-on for patients served in rural areas. The package features other provider cuts, including a one-year freeze on the skilled nursing facility market basket update and reduction for the inpatient hospital update of .25 percent.

The one-year home health freeze is in keeping with recommendations from the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission; however, the House rejected a proposal in the President's FY2008 budget that would impose a five-year freeze on the home health market basket. A Senate SCHIP package, approved last week by the Senate Finance Committee, contains NO home health market basket reduction.

There are a number of Medicare Advantage reforms in the legislation, including a phase out of payments to plans in excess of program costs under traditional fee-for-service, as well as a prohibition against plans charging co-payments for specific services above those charged under traditional Medicare (this would prohibit any co-pay on home health services).

Here's what this means in plain English: When home care agencies (certified and under insurance regulations) receive lower payments, they are forced to "stay within limits". Staying within limits ordained by the government overlooks the specifics of each case. Every case is different. One size doesn't fit all.

That's why at the national level, the National Association for Home Care & Hospice and other advocates are coordinating efforts to fight the freeze and to seek relief from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' proposed regulatory "case mix creep" cut of 8.77 percent over 2008 – 2010 published earlier this summer.

It's important for you to know that even at the state level many of us are fighting for better benefits. For instance, I am active with the Home Care Alliance of Massachusetts—which has recently joined forces with the National Private Duty Association—to scrutinize legislative issues that could in the future affect the care you receive. Even though my agency is private, I fully grasp the implications of this potential legislation on your care. I'll continue to support issues that affect funding for future care of yourself or your loved ones.

The good news is, enactment of a home health freeze for 2008 is not a foregone conclusion – there are many more steps in the legislative process. But we must all act now to fight these efforts.

Here's what you can do:

- Locally, 2nd District Congressman Richard Neal serves on the House Ways & Means Committee. Congressman Neal's district extends from the Connecticut River Valley in the west, to the Blackstone River Valley in the east. His website is <http://www.house.gov/neal>. If you are his district, call or email his office today and express your opposition to the home health freeze. His local number is (508) 634-8198 and his health staffer is Ann Jablon (Ann.Jablon@mail.house.gov).
- 3rd District Congressman James (Jim) McGovern represents the interests of this area in the House. Call his office and urge him to contact leaders of the Ways & Means Committee to oppose a home health market basket freeze or cut. His website is <http://mcgovern.house.gov>; the number for his local office is 508-831-7356.
- Nationally, the website for the House Ways & Means Committee is <http://waysandmeans.house.gov>. Click on the link for members and you will find links to every member of the committee, whom you can contact to express your opposition to the home health freeze.

You have a voice—and a stake—in helping legislators help you get the home health care you deserve. 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.

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