

CMS Announces Candidates for New National Coverage Determinations

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) recently published a list of candidates for new national coverage determinations (NCDs) that includes PSA screening, proton beam therapy, surgery for low-risk prostate cancers and PET for Alzheimer's disease. The agency uses NCDs to "align program incentives with the best available clinical evidence." NCDs typically are viewed as a means to limit reimbursement, but CMS notes that the list also includes items and services that may be underused.

Many of the candidate items and services already are covered under NCDs -- three are covered only if beneficiaries agree to take part in research, called coverage with evidence determination, which includes PET for Alzheimer's disease. A CMS spokesperson said the existing NCDs could be modified in many ways, including adding patient populations, adding applications or changing dosages. CMS could also consider dropping an NCD if there is evidence that it no longer is needed. For many of the items on the list, it's not clear whether CMS intends to modify NCDs or drop them.

According to the CMS website, there is no NCD for proton beam therapy but local coverage policies are in place. Surgery for low risk prostate cancer has no NCD or local coverage determinations (LCDs).

Currently, PSA screening is a covered Medicare service under statute, however, the United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recently recommended against routine screening for prostate cancer for most men.

The last list of NCD candidates was published in 2008. "Since the list was published in 2008, there have been significant developments in new technologies and changes to CMS authorities under statute," CMS stated last year when it announced that it would like public input for a new list. The new list results in part from those public comments.

The health care advisory firm Avalere Health LLC says it views the new list as significant for life sciences companies, health insurance plans and providers because CMS is likely to conduct a thorough coverage or evidence review for a subset of items on the list, with potential for Medicare coverage and spillover to commercial insurers. "This action signals the potential for changes in access to the listed technologies for Medicare beneficiaries and patients with commercial insurance coverage," the firm notes.

Avalere says it expects that CMS will prioritize the following areas for review in 2013: PET for Alzheimer's disease; ventricular assist devices; colorectal cancer screening.