

Freestanding Radiation Oncologists Pleased With Physician Pay Rule

Freestanding radiation oncologists say they are pleased with CMS' recently issued final physician payment rule because it puts on hold a technical change, which would have cut pay by 4 percent, delays separate pay cuts for a year and lets radiation oncologists comment on pay cuts before they potentially take effect in 2016.

Until now, CMS published payment rates in an annual interim final rule – a process that didn't allow providers to comment on those rates before they take effect. At the request of physician lobbyists, many lawmakers urged CMS to instead publish payment rates in an annual proposed rule to give physicians an opportunity to ask for changes. CMS agreed, but it initially proposed to implement that change in the 2016 payment cycle and to stick doctors with the changes to payment rates for 2015 using the system that doesn't allow them to argue against pay cuts.

CMS compromised in the final rule by delaying the transparency process until 2017 for all services, except radiation therapy and gastroenterology. For radiation therapy, CMS will begin the transparency process in the 2016 payment cycle, and CMS will not cut payment for radiation therapy in 2015.

Another huge win for freestanding clinics is that CMS put on hold its proposal to remove radiation treatment vaults as a direct cost for radiation treatment codes. That technical change would have cut average Medicare reimbursement for radiation oncology services by 4 percent. CMS says in the final rule that it needs more time to study the idea.