

BIPARTISAN GROUP OF LAWMAKERS CALLS FOR RO MODEL & PHYSICIAN FEE SCHEDULE ADJUSTMENTS

A bipartisan group of lawmakers is joining radiation oncologists in asking CMS to further decrease Radiation Oncology Model (RO Model) discount factors and reduce proposed Medicare Physician Fee Schedule (MPFS) cuts.

Nearly 20 senators led by Senate health committee ranking member Richard Burr (R-NC) and Finance health subcommittee Chair Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) wrote to CMS on October 18th raising concerns about radiation oncologists' financial future if CMS finalizes proposed RO Model discount factors and MPFS cuts.

Sixty-seven members in the House earlier in October wrote a similar letter asking CMS to adjust the RO Model's discount factors and minimize cuts in next year's MPFS.

"[W]e are concerned about the combined impact of two recent Medicare proposals which would result in reduced Medicare payments to critical radiation therapy cancer treatment services by an estimated \$300 million annually," Reps. Brian Higgins (D-NY) and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA), along with other lawmakers, wrote to CMS on October 20th. "These cuts would threaten the ability of patients, particularly underserved populations, to receive state-of-the-art care close to home."

The proposed fee schedule would reduce radiation oncology payments by about \$140 million next year, or 8.75%. Coupled with other scheduled changes, experts expect payments for breast and prostate cancer care to be reduced by 13% and certain lung cancer treatments by 22%.

"Emerging from COVID-19, radiation oncologists are struggling to treat patients that missed screenings and now require more complex treatments for more advanced cancers. The burden of these reductions will fall hardest on those clinics that serve rural and underserved patients, threatening to further exacerbate disparities in care," lawmakers wrote.

Lawmakers encouraged the administration to engage stakeholders to address various issues with the clinical labor payment policy, including inadequate valuation of radiation therapy medical physicists.

Meanwhile, experts say the mandatory radiation oncology demonstration would reduce payments to oncologists participating in the model by \$160 million over five years.

The Trump-era demo would provide bundled payments for a 90-day episode of care to certain radiotherapy providers and suppliers furnishing radiotherapy for: anal cancer, bladder cancer, bone metastases, brain metastases, breast cancer, cervical cancer, CNS tumors, colorectal cancer, head and neck cancer, lung cancer, lymphoma, pancreatic cancer, prostate cancer, upper gastrointestinal cancer and uterine cancer. Providers in randomly selected locations across the country would participate in the mandatory model.

The American Society for Radiation Oncologists (ASTRO) was disappointed this summer when the Biden administration didn't change much of the previous administration's proposed RO Model. ASTRO said earlier this month it would engage Congress since it's had little luck in convincing the Biden administration to change the model's discount factors.

Representatives specifically asked CMS to reduce the RO Model's discount factors to no more than 3% and address what they call burdensome data collection and reporting requirements. Senators do not specify in their letter what range they would like to see the discount factors be.

"We appreciate that CMS acknowledged the concerns of many, including ourselves, by slightly reducing the discount factors in a recent revision of the model. That said, we continue to hear numerous objections from health care providers and Medicare beneficiaries to the model's current form. As such, we again urge CMS to address remaining concerns with the breadth and mandatory nature of the model," senators said.