

CMS KEEPS CUTS IN CONTROVERSIAL RADIATION ONCOLOGY DEMO

The Biden administration's proposed changes to the mandatory Radiation Oncology Model (RO Model) are not enough to quell oncologists' concerns that the model's cuts could hurt the quality of care, especially coupled with Medicare physician payment cuts proposed in the recently released 2022 Medicare Physician Fee Schedule (MPFS).

The RO Model demonstration, proposed last year, would provide bundled payments for a 90-day episode of care to certain radiotherapy providers and suppliers furnishing radiotherapy for 15 types of cancer. Providers in randomly selected locations across the country would participate in the mandatory model.

Oncologists had issues with the demonstration's original timeline, in addition to concerns that the cuts CMS built into the model were so steep they could hurt the quality of care. Specifically, providers worried about changing payments in the middle of a pandemic on January 1, 2021. CMS formally delayed the model's start date until July 1, 2021 after pushback from radiation oncologists, and then lawmakers stepped in to give providers until January 1, 2022.

Now CMS proposes in the 2022 Medicare hospital outpatient proposed rule to make some technical tweaks in the timeline in response to Congress' start date. If finalized, the demonstration would go from January 1, 2022 through December 31, 2026 and the baseline period would change from 2016-2018 to 2017-2019.

CMS also wants to revise the cancer inclusion criteria, removing liver cancer from the model and keeping brachytherapy in fee-for-service.

In addition, the proposed rule would create an unforeseen circumstances policy that reduces administrative burden like reporting requirements or adjusts the payment methodology in the case of an extreme and uncontrollable event.

CMS also plans to count as an incomplete treatment episode a traditional Medicare beneficiary who switches to Medicare Advantage during that timeframe and before treatment is complete. The agency would stop paying the provider under the radiation oncology model and pay them the traditional Medicare rate.

Finally, the proposed rule would exclude certain hospital outpatient departments like those participating in the Community Transformation track of the CHART Model and those enrolled in the Pennsylvania Rural Health Model.

Dave Adler, American Society for Radiation Oncology vice president of advocacy, said via email his organization is disheartened the Biden administration didn't eliminate the demonstration's cuts, though the group is looking forward to helping the president achieve his goal to end cancer.

"ASTRO is still reviewing the minor changes, but we are disappointed that CMS's radiation oncology model continues to emphasize significant payment cuts on practices that have no choice but to participate," Adler said. "Unfortunately, the RO Model reductions today and massive Medicare physician payment cuts to radiation oncology will risk access to high quality radiation therapy for patients."