CMS Proposes Coverage of Alzheimer's PET Scans Used Only in Clinical Trials

According to a recent proposed coverage decision, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) announced that Medicare will pay only for positron emission tomography (PET) imaging tests to help diagnose Alzheimer’s when patients are in clinical trials. Alzheimer's advocates were disappointed by the decision and had hoped for broader coverage. Until recently, CMS refused to cover PET imaging for any condition, but in December the Agency reversed that policy for cancer, leaving coverage decisions up to local contractors. CMS separately considered coverage of PET for neurologic conditions such as Alzheimer's.

CMS proposes that Medicare cover one PET scan per patient through coverage with evidence development for patients in clinical trials because “the evidence is insufficient to conclude that the use of positron emission tomography (PET) amyloid-beta (Aβ) imaging improves health outcomes for Medicare beneficiaries with dementia or neurodegenerative disease.”

Although CMS believes there is insufficient evidence to approve national coverage, CMS says beta amyloid PET imaging holds promise in helping diagnose patients showing early signs of dementia because the technology can rule out Alzheimer's in some situations. PET also could be useful in certain Alzheimer's clinical trials, but the objectives must be to develop better treatment or prevention strategies for Alzheimer's Disease or identify subpopulations at risk for developing the disease. The clinical studies must be approved by CMS.