



AKF Speaks Up About CMS Proposed Rule

LaVarne A. Burton, President and CEO, American Kidney Fund

The news this week that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) is proposing an effective 9.4 percent cut in the Medicare dialysis benefit was a shock to everyone in the kidney care community. We have witnessed the impact of previous cuts, and we have urged CMS to be moderate in its approach to future reductions. This proposal is anything but moderate.

At the American Kidney Fund, we provide charitable assistance to one-fifth of the nation's dialysis patients. Our patients are those who have nowhere else to turn for financial assistance, and we hear from them daily about the struggles they are facing. Many of our patient advocates have expressed concern over changes in their care as a result of recent reductions to the Medicare dialysis payment system. Patients have told us of reduced staffing levels at dialysis facilities and changes in approved medications.

If the cuts of recent years have struck patients as dramatic, just wait until a 9.4 percent cut is implemented. It is difficult to accurately project the impact of such a cut, because the Medicare ESRD program has never before sustained such a reduction, but I think it is safe to say that patients are going to experience real limitations in access to dialysis, and reductions to their choice in care.

The proposed rule is particularly surprising given the input CMS has received while developing this rule. Input has come not only from patients, patient advocacy organizations, and dialysis providers, but also from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle. Just last month, 17 U.S. Senators sent a bipartisan letter urging CMS to be cautious, and to avoid reducing payments to a level less than the cost of providing care. As the Senators noted, "CMS must remain accountable to beneficiaries who depend on Medicare coverage to receive life-saving dialysis care."

With CMS accepting comments on the proposed rule until August 30, it's a sure bet that all of us in the renal community will be mobilizing to urge CMS to adjust this proposed rule so that it does not gut the Medicare dialysis benefit. The future of dialysis care in our nation is at stake.