Medicare Non-Acceptance by Primary Care Physicians in Tallahassee

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Background

- Florida has the nation’s highest proportion of older residents and most rely on Medicare for their healthcare needs [1].
- Reports have shown that there is an overall decline in the number of physicians who accept patients with Medicare, with about 7% of physicians nationwide reporting that they do not accept new Medicare patients [2].
- Understanding trends can help inform policy makers of potential access problems and provide knowledge to address issues.

Purpose

a) To determine the pattern of Medicare acceptance by primary care physicians in Tallahassee.

b) To determine if there is a discrepancy between physicians’ reports of accepting new Medicare patients on an electronic survey and actual acceptance by using a “secret-shopper” style telephone survey.

Methods

- The sample included 79 practicing primary care internists and family physicians in Tallahassee who were listed in the Florida Department of Health’s license profile database.
- An electronic survey was emailed to the sample inquiring about their office’s acceptance of new Medicare patients.
- Respondents who indicated they accepted new Medicare patients were contacted by the student researcher who acted as a "secret shopper," posing as a son of an independent elderly person moving to Tallahassee.

Results

- 7.7% of the respondents reported not being a participating Medicare provider.
- Of those physicians who accept Medicare assignment, 44% do not accept and 16% currently limit new Medicare patients.
- In the “secret-shopper” calls, 100% of the respondents who had indicated they were accepting new patients did accept new Medicare patients.

Conclusion

- Of the physicians accepting Medicare assignment, the majority are either not accepting or are limiting acceptance of new Medicare patients. With only 40% of the physicians accepting new Medicare patients, this could provide a significant obstacle for access to care for older persons.
- Contrary to anecdotal reports, our “secret-shopper” method did not reveal any physicians who refused a new Medicare patient if they had responded to the survey that their practice was open to new patients.

Discussion

- Policy makers must acknowledge that Medicare fee levels and payments are only one of the several healthcare system issues that affect the decision for physicians to not accept or limit new patients.
- It is likely that if more physicians in a community accept new Medicare patients, problems of having a full practice and too many complex patients will be spread over many different providers.

References