

Health Care Scandal

Most health care analysts predict that Medicare will be completely drained by the year 2010. So should we sit and watch?

The largest group of predators is too well respected by the nation to be questioned regarding the dwindling Medicare resources: physicians. Unfortunately, I need to maintain anonymity as I must continue to provide for my family. I have been in the medical field (Radiology) for a long time. Three months ago, one of my junior technologists told me that she was moonlighting; she was working for four internal medicine groups, each one with an average of seven doctors. She told me that she performs numerous ultrasound exams that are unnecessary but that this is how the physicians are generating more monies. She said that she feels uncomfortable with the antiquated systems that the MDs have purchased and has informed them that many of the images obtained are of such poor quality that diagnosis is "iffy". The answer has been the same from almost every one of the doctors "the quality of the image is not as important as long as there are pictures in the patient folder so a bill for ultrasound can be submitted to the insurance company". She estimates that 65 % of patients seen in these offices are Medicare. My colleague was concerned enough that she requested I visit one of the sites with her. I did and when I turned the system on, I made several adjustments, utilizing my years of experience with a variety of challenging ultrasound systems. I could not create a decent image of diagnostic quality. I then asked the technologist how these images were being interpreted and by whom. The information that I learned next was even more disgusting: the physicians from these offices have "a deal" with a group of radiologists. The radiologists can't complain about the poor quality images because they never even see them. They dictate their reports right from her worksheet. (Every ultrasound technologist is to complete a worksheet explaining their findings of each case.)

The scandal is even more widespread than the above story indicates. Not too long ago, I received a call from a previous supervisor who is presently working as the director of a radiology department in a large medical center. He told me that he needed my help and that the hospital would like to pay me for "my services". I informed him that my present work situation was good and that I did not wish to change facilities at this point in my career. He interrupted me and said that I wouldn't need to make any changes in my

work situation but that what he was requesting was the use of my national registry license (from ARDMS). This would allow his facility to bill all insurance companies for ultrasound examinations (some insurance companies, Medicare included, require accreditation for reimbursement). "Right now I have five unregistered ultrasound technologists and we need to have an ACR accredited department." I was stunned. I asked him if he was aware that this would be an illegal act and that I would be responsible for errors since the technologists would be working under my license. He hesitated and then told me "This kind of thing is done all the time. The ACR never even comes to the facility to verify that the names on the application are actually registered technologists". He said that the ACR just wants to ensure that they receive the application / processing fees from the facility. He knew then that he had asked the wrong guy for the job. He said, " I can get somebody else to let us use their license, I just came to you first because I wanted you to make the money."

Actually, if Medicare wants to immediately restore a substantial amount of money, they should go after the facilities (and private MDs) where vascular ultrasound testing is performed by technologists who are not registered. As of January 1999, Medicare requires that all vascular testing be done by sonographers who have passed the national vascular registry exam (i.e.: who are registered vascular technologist, RVTs). I've been in the field long enough to know that almost 75% of the vascular testing done in my section of the country is performed by unregistered (and incompetent) personnel.

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