

PRACTITIONER ENROLLMENT IN MEDICARE PROGRAM INCREASES FOR 1996

From US Dept. of Health & Human Services

■(WASHINGTON) More than three-quarters of the physicians and other practitioners who serve Medicare beneficiaries have enrolled in the Medicare participating physician program for 1996, HHS Secretary Donna E. Shalala announced recently. Participation ranges from a high of 92.2 percent in North Dakota to a low of 60.1 percent in Idaho.

The overall rate of participation is 77.5 percent this year, up from 72.3 percent in 1995. The number of enrollees in the program has increased to 627,000 in 1996 from 620,000 last year. Participation rose in 45 states, as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

"Under the participating physician program beneficiaries do not pay charges above

Medicare-approved limits," Shalala said. "Medicare beneficiaries have found this to be a valuable program for more than 10 years."

Participation has risen every year since the program started in 1984. The overall rate includes medical doctors (MDs), limited license practitioners and non-physician practitioners:

✓ For MDs and doctors of osteopathy, the participation rate increased to 80 percent in 1996, up from 74.6 percent in 1995.

✓ For limited license practitioners, who are optometrists, podiatrists, chiropractors or oral surgeons, the participation rate rose to 50.3 percent, compared with 44.6 percent in 1995.

✓ For non-physician practitioners, the participation rate increased to 93.1 percent in 1996 from 91.6 percent in 1995.

"Two principal factors contribute to the increases in the physician participation program," said Bruce C. Vladeck, administrator of the Health Care Financing Administration, which manages Medicare. "We continue to remind beneficiaries about the program's benefits and we enforce the limits placed on charges made by non-participating physicians."

A participating physician agrees to accept Medicare fee schedule amounts as full payment for Medicare service.

"Services provided by participating physicians now account for just over 90 percent of Medicare-allowed charges for physician services," Vladeck said.

Medicare pays 80 percent of the fee schedule amount for a physician's service. For a Medicare-covered service provided by a participating physician, the beneficiary is responsible for 20 percent of the fee schedule amount. A non-participating physician, however, may charge a beneficiary more, up to a limit defined by law.

Some non-physician practitioners are required by law to "accept assignment" for all covered services. (That is, they accept the Medicare fee schedule amount as full payment.) They are certified registered nurse anesthetists, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, nurse midwives, clinical nurse specialists, clinical psychologists and clinical social workers. Non-physician practitioners who do not have to accept assignment are audiologists, physical therapists, psychologists and occupational therapists.

Physicians are advised that participating in the program creates the following advantages:

✓ Their Medicare fee schedule is 5 percent higher than that of non-participating physicians.

✓ They are provided with toll-free lines if they submit claims electronically.

✓ Their names are listed in the Medicare Participating Physician/Supplier Directory, which is furnished to senior citizen groups.

Non-participating providers are advised they can charge beneficiaries no more than 115 percent of the Medicare allowance.

In January of 1995, 72.3 percent of Oklahoma's physicians were participating in the program, now as of January 1996, that number has climbed to 76.1 percent.

GOVERNMENT/INDUSTRY COALITION FORMED FOR AIR BAG SAFETY

From US Dept. of Transportation

■(WASHINGTON) Secretary of Transportation Federico Pena Tuesday announced the formation of an unprecedented coalition of automobile manufacturers, air bag suppliers, insurance companies, safety organizations and the federal government to prevent injuries and fatalities which may be inadvertently caused by air bags, especially to children.

"Safety is President Clinton's top transportation priority," Secretary Pena said. "Together, business and government will work to alert the public to the proper role of air bags and to ensure that seat belts are always used with an air bag. In addition, we will educate parents about the best way to install a child safety seat in a car that has a passenger side air bag."

Coalition members have pledged almost \$10 million to pursue a three-point program:

✓ An extensive national effort to educate drivers, parents and care-givers about seat belt and child safety seat use in all motor vehicles, with special emphasis on those equipped with air bags.

✓ A campaign to convince states to pass primary seat belt use laws. Under such a primary law, police officers need no other reason to stop a driver and issue a ticket than failure to use a seat belt. Only 12 states have primary laws. Thirty-seven states currently have secondary belt laws, meaning that po-

lice may cite belt law offenders only if first stopped for some other violation.

✓ Activities at state and local levels to increase enforcement of all seat belt and child seat use laws, such as increased public information and use of belt checkpoints.

Air bags are an important safety advance that have saved some 1,500 lives since the late 1980s, said Secretary Pena. However, NHTSA is aware of at least 19 cases in which a child either in a rear-facing infant seat or riding improperly belted was killed by a deploying air bag.

"Infants in rear-facing child safety seats should never be placed in the front seat if the vehicle has a passenger-side air bag," said Ricardo Martinez, M.D., administrator of the department's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). "The safest place for children of all ages is the back seat. If riding in the back seat is not an option, toddlers and older children may ride in the front seat of a vehicle with a passenger-side air bag, but only if buckled up properly and with the seat moved as far back as possible," he added.

All passenger cars must offer dual front air bags by model year 1998, and light trucks the following year. Virtually every new passenger vehicle sold today comes equipped with at least a driver-side air bag, and many already offer dual air bags in the front seat.

"Somebody's boring me ... I think it's me."

Dylan Thomas