

Dermatology Coding Alert

Reader Questions: Don't Expect Medicare to Recognize 'After-Hours'

Question: Will Medicare pay extra for the surgeon seeing the patient for an unscheduled appointment on a holiday? We can count on this happening at least once every year during the holiday season.

Florida Subscriber

Answer: In a word: No.

CPT does provide three codes to describe "after-hours" services, such as those provided on a holiday:

- 99050 -- Services requested after posted office hours in addition to basic service
- 99052 -- ... between 10:00 pm and 8:00 am in addition to basic service
- 99054 -- ... on Sundays and holidays in addition to basic service.

Medicare and Medicaid do not recognize after-hours codes. Rather, they consider such care to be part of any E/M service provided. A typical local Medicare-carrier policy states, "When services designated as bundled are denied, the physician may not collect from the patient or the patient's supplemental insurer for the denied service. This would represent either a limiting charge violation (if the claim is nonassigned) or an assignment violation (if the claim is assigned)." The carrier specifically includes 99050-99054 in this group. Private payers may recognize after-hours codes, but guidelines and reimbursement are inconsistent.

Smart idea: To improve your chances for payment, you may wish to negotiate with private payers for payment of after-hours codes as part of any contractual agreement. Unlike Medicare, private payers may prefer that physicians use after-hours codes. The alternative to seeing the patient after-hours in the office is to send him to the emergency department -- which will cost that insurer even more. Use this as leverage when negotiating with payers. For payers that will allow 99050-99054, report the codes only if the physician sees a patient for an unscheduled appointment at a time when his office would otherwise be closed.

-- Answers to You Be the Coder and Reader Questions were reviewed by **Linda Martien, CPC, CPC-H**, National Healthcare Review in Woodland Hills, Calif.; and **Jeffrey Weinberg, MD**, director of the Clinical Research Center, department of dermatology at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York City.