

Dermatology Coding Alert

Reader Questions: Family Consults May Be a Patient Service

Question: A patient comes in to discuss the care of his wife, who is also a patient and whom the dermatologist is treating for lung cancer. The dermatologist spent 30 minutes with the husband, describing treatment options, possible outcomes, etc. Because the wife isn't present, may I bill the visit?

Arizona Subscriber

Answer: The E/M codes include "face-to-face with the patient and/or the family." But most private payers follow Medicare's policy and don't cover encounters in which the patient isn't present.

Most insurers reimburse only for services that the physician delivers directly to the patient unless the patient is unable to make care decisions for himself, in which case you should consider the meeting with the caregiver as the same as a meeting with the patient. In this case, however, you should consider the visit a service to the person who is in the office.

Counseling comprises more than 50 percent of the visit, in this case 100 percent. So, you should select the appropriate level of E/M service based on time.

For a 30-minute established patient office visit, you should report 99214 (Office or other outpatient visit for the evaluation and management of an established patient ... physicians typically spend 25 minutes face-to-face with the patient and/or family).

For the diagnosis code, you should use either V61.49 (Health problems within family; other), which includes care of or presence of a sick person in the family or household, or V65.19 (Other person consulting on behalf of another person), which includes advice or treatment for a nonattending third party.

If the payer does not reimburse for these codes, you may be able to bill the patient, such as the husband in this case.

Bonus: When this is the case, you should explain the payer's position to the husband/family and get an advance beneficiary notice signed before the visit so you may legally bill the patient/family in the event of a denial.

- 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 **William J. Conner, MD**, physician at Meridian Medical Group, a multispecialty practice in Charlotte, N.C.