

Part B Insider (Multispecialty) Coding Alert

PHYSICIAN NOTES: AMA Warns of Doctor Glut, Primary-Care Shortage

Delegates vote to change policy to encourage family practice

1. The American Medical Association's House of Delegates voted Dec. 8 to amend its longstanding policy finding that continued growth in the U.S. physician workforce would lead to an oversupply of doctors. The amended policy states that, while the nation's overall supply of physicians has more than kept pace with population growth, physicians are lacking in rural areas and in some urban-shortage areas. A declining interest in family practice as a specialty will further endanger access for many, the group says.

When it comes to remedial action, AMA so far only says that it backs the so-called Title VII programs run by the federal Health Resources and Services Administration that aim at increasing physician supply in primary-care and family-practice specialties, public health, and medically underserved regions, and that it will prepare its own analysis of current shortages.

Except for programs that address nursing, the Bush Administration in each of its annual budget proposals has recommended drastically cutting and in some cases eliminating Title VII health-professions programs. In its FY 2003 budget, the administration listed those programs among the 5 percent of federal programs it called "ineffective." And unlike the redesigns or retargetings that administration analysts recommended for most other items they deemed "ineffective," a continued "phase-out" was proposed for Title VII.

2. Comprehensive information about grants available from all federal agencies will soon be available at <http://www.grants.gov>, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson announced Dec. 9. HHS -which awards more than half of all competitive federal grants - led the project, part of President Bush's e-government initiative. The site now includes information about 800 grant programs, search features, and simplified downloadable applications that can be submitted electronically. Eventually, material on most competitive federal grants will be available from the site.
3. You can give your two cents to the HHS Office of Inspector General on new or changed safe harbors to the antikickback statute. In its annual Federal Register solicitation of proposals to protect innocuous business arrangements from the extremely broad antikickback law, the OIG also welcomes suggestions for topics to be addressed in future special fraud alerts.

The request is at www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/fedreg/a031212c.html.

4. On the heels of CMS

Administrator Tom Scully's departure, Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson has announced he won't stay on in his position if President Bush wins a second term in office.

Meanwhile, Thompson named Dennis Smith as CMS Acting Administrator to temporarily replace Scully. Smith is director of CMS' Center for Medicaid and State Operations.