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Press Release

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Medicare Rule Change Sets New Immunization Standards

A Federal rule revision will help facilitate delivery of influenza and pneumococcal vaccinations in hospitals, home health agencies, and nursing homes serving Medicare or Medicaid patients.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) removed its requirement from the Conditions of Participation that a physician must write an individual order for each influenza and pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccination given in hospital and long term care settings and by home health agencies. The Federal rule, 42 CFR Parts 482, 483, and 484, went into effect October 2. Where allowed by state law, appropriate non-physician personnel can now provide these vaccinations under a facility-approved standing order protocol.

The new rules make it faster and easier for patients to get their flu and pneumonia vaccinations, said Peter Houck, MD, chief medical officer of the CMS Seattle Regional Office and a lead physician for the prevention of flu and pneumonia under Medicare. "The new system relieves the burden from the physician so that they do not have to sign for each individual patient, making it a more effective and efficient system," he said. A study by the RAND Corporation found that standing orders programs are one of the most effective methods to vaccinate patients.

Each year, more than 90 percent of the 20,000 to 40,000 deaths related to flu and pneumonia occur among those age 65 or older, making it the fifth leading cause of death for this age group. Preventive vaccines are a covered benefit of the Medicare program, but immunization rates are still too low. According to a 1999 telephone survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only 67.4 percent of individuals in this age group received a flu shot that year, and 54.9 had ever received a pneumonia shot. The Healthy People 2010 goal is to immunize at least 90 percent of all older Americans.

CMS, the Federal agency responsible for the Medicare and Medicaid programs, removed the regulatory barrier to further facilitate safe and effective vaccine delivery and to reduce the administrative burden on health care facilities and physicians. The rule change is expected to increase immunization rates of older Americans and to reduce high morbidity and mortality rates due to occurrences of influenza and pneumonia.

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Editor's Notes:

For more information, go to CMS website <http://www.cms.gov/providerupdate/regsum.asp#3160FC>.

The Oklahoma Foundation for Medical Quality (OFMQ) is under contract with CMS to support its initiative to generate increased awareness of this federal regulation change.
See www.nationalpneumonia.org.