

L

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

E. P. C. M. S.

Letter to the Editor

Dear Patient,

Effective January 1, 2012 Medicaid of Texas enacted two major changes. First, it will no longer pay the full Medicare co-pay and deductible for patients who have both Medicare and Medicaid. Second, it has forced all Medicare/Medicaid (dual eligible) recipients into one of two Medicaid HMO's. We are not currently contracted with either of those Medicaid HMO's and it is unclear if we will be able to enroll with them.

Under Federal law, physicians who accept Medicare are barred from billing dual eligible patients directly for any amounts not paid by Medicaid, even when Medicaid doesn't pay what they are contractually bound to pay or what Medicare allows to be paid. From January 1, 2012 onward, Texas Medicaid will only pay on average 25% of the previous benefit for dual eligible patients. This represents a decline of about 15% in practice revenues for dual eligible patients.

This decision unfortunately will likely have a serious negative impact on the delivery of healthcare in the border region. As you may be aware, there is a significant shortage of physicians in the border region. You may already have noticed long wait times to schedule a visit with your doctors and in some instances have needed to go out of town because there wasn't a specialist in the area that you need. Because of the new Medicaid change, this will worsen.

The border region has the highest percentage of dual eligible patients. Further, Medicare reimburses physicians in the border at a lower rate than in larger cities like Dallas, Houston and Austin. Another 15% reduction in payments to physician practices for dual eligible patients in the border region will make it that much more difficult to bring in new physicians and will cause others to retire or move. (For a typical doctor practice with 60% overhead operating costs, the Medicaid cut would represent up to a 37.5% salary reduction in physician pay if the patient base was made up entirely of dual eligible patients.)

Unfortunately, this practice is not immune to the changes. Effective April 1, 2012, Sun Eye Care, PA will not accept new dual eligible patients except for the cases of emergency, follow up from an Emergency Room evaluation, referral from another physician or when a patient needs surgery. Similarly, until or if we can become contracted with the new Medicaid HMO's we will

not be accepting new Medicaid patients. Only in the case of emergency or Emergency Room follow-up will we accept new Medicaid patients.

If you have concern about the future of the quality of care in El Paso and the border region and access to care for some of our poorest and most at risk people, you may wish to contact your elected officials.

Michael W. Foote, M.D. is an Ophthalmologist in private practice in El Paso, Texas.

AD