



December 15, 2009

Secretary Kathleen Sebelius  
Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Re: 1413-FC 2010 Medicare Physician Fee Schedule Final Rule

CC: Jonathon Blum, Center for Medicare Management

Dear Secretary Sebelius:

I am writing on behalf of the American College of Rheumatology to express our strong opposition to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) decision to eliminate consultation service codes beginning January 1, 2010. This decision will compromise patient access to necessary specialty care and could potentially force specialists to stop seeing Medicare patients. The College urges CMS to delay the elimination of consultation service codes and establish new codes that adequately compensate specialists for their work.

The College represents over 6,000 rheumatologists and rheumatology health professionals in the United States who are dedicated to treating arthritis, rheumatic and musculoskeletal diseases. These diseases are complex, debilitating and often times life threatening. Specialized care from a rheumatologist is essential to the livelihood of patients.

Rheumatologists treat patients with severe chronic conditions which require not only time to complete an exhaustive clinical evaluation and to review medical history, but also the expertise to analyze and synthesize medical data into meaningful recommendations that are individualized to patients' needs. Patients with complex conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, lupus and scleroderma are often referred by a physician who does not have the time or expertise to properly diagnose and treat the patient. In many cases, patients are referred back to the original physician for on-going care or, in other cases, patients continue to see the rheumatologist. In either case, rheumatologists must complete the necessary comprehensive medical records review and diagnostic evaluation to ensure the best treatment for each patient's specific condition.

The College has significant concerns that the elimination of consultation service codes will greatly reduce patient access to specialty care and result in patients with complex diseases receiving delayed and potentially inferior care. By removing consultation service codes, CMS is stating that the advanced training and unique specialty care provided by rheumatologists is not valued. Removing reimbursements from specialists in order to increase reimbursements for primary care physicians is not appropriate and will force specialists to stop seeing Medicare patients and decrease patient access to quality care.

Furthermore, there is significant confusion among physician groups on implementation of these changes. At a minimum, more time is needed to educate physicians about the change. To ensure access to specialty care alternative coding mechanisms that account for the work of complex cognitive consultations should be developed.

***The College strongly opposes the elimination of consultation service codes and urges CMS to delay for one year to allow for adequate education and determine new codes that adequately compensate specialists for their work.*** If you have any questions, please contact Aiken Hackett at [ahackett@rheumatology.org](mailto:ahackett@rheumatology.org) or (404) 929-4811.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stanley Cohen', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Stanley Cohen, MD  
President  
American College of Rheumatology