



Oncologists as Presidential Bad Guys

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FACT Only ACCC represents the entire interdisciplinary team caring for oncology patients, including medical, radiation, & surgical oncologists, oncology nurses, cancer program administrators, oncology social workers, pharmacists, and cancer registrars.

FACT ACCC is committed to federal and state efforts to pass legislation that ensures access to off-label uses of FDA-approved drugs and clinical trials for cancer patients, appropriate reimbursement to physicians for drugs administered to Medicare patients, and other patient advocacy issues.

FACT ACCC provides information about approaches for the effective management, delivery, and financing of comprehensive cancer care through its national meetings, regional symposia, and publication of oncology patient management guidelines, standards for cancer programs, critical pathways, oncology-related drugs and indications, and *Oncology Issues*.

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FROM THE EDITOR

Oncologists as Presidential Bad Guys

by Lee E. Mortenson, D.P.A.

Here's a new twist. The President of the United States decided to make us the subject of his weekend radio address.

Do you think he was thanking oncologists for their hard work on behalf of people with cancer? No. He was fighting "waste, fraud, and abuse" and "overpayments that cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars." He explained that these overpayments "occur because Medicare reimburses doctors according to the published average wholesale price—the so-called sticker price—for drugs. Few doctors, however, actually pay the full sticker price. In fact, some pay just one-tenth of the published price, he noted. So, "only by putting a permanent stop to it can we honor our parents, protect our taxpayers, and build a world-class health care system for the 21st century."

Is it really possible that the White House and Congress could be so naïve? They should know that by cutting the costs of drug margins to acquisition HCFA's admitted underpayment of infusion costs (roughly one-third to one-fourth of the actual costs are reimbursed according to HCFA's own study) will lead oncologists to stop providing chemotherapy in their offices and force patients back into a higher cost environment.

My best guess is that HCFA would save \$700 million and spend roughly \$2.6 billion on drugs in the hospital outpatient setting. Of course, it would then attempt to squeeze hospital costs, and then what? Well, we would not be providing patients with chemotherapy in hospitals or in offices. How about at home?

Mr. President, your sources at the Health Care Financing Administration are clueless. They

are ignoring their own studies of the costs of administering drugs in offices and insisting that oncologists not be paid for the drug or the administration. This practice will inevitably lead to patient and family inconvenience and to higher costs as hospitals with higher overheads take up the slack—assuming that they, in turn, are not similarly disincentivized to provide drugs to cancer patients.

When the President talks about "honoring our parents," he should think about all the parents with cancer who have a tough enough time taking chemotherapy without having to go farther to fewer places to receive it. He might wonder who is going to provide those parents with chemotherapy and where? Will they have to pay for it out of their own pockets?

Mr. President, you were sold a bill of goods by the HCFA folks, who were certain that they could get some legislators to believe that there were huge savings to be had here. It just doesn't fly.

And Mr. President, you might want to ask HCFA staff about how they are attempting to create back-door federal policies. Medicare medical directors will in effect be developing state-level policies that restrict access to drugs... (all of which they claim they can do without public comment), and then they will be getting all the states to adopt these policies. Voila! National policy without the hassle of that nasty public comment and public scrutiny stuff.

Well, chastening our President and pointing out the deficiencies of our bureaucrats are lousy ways to start the New Year. I think I'll just go see a movie about a large luxury liner with a similarly able crew. I understand "Titanic" is playing at big screens everywhere. 🍷