

Professional Practice Corner

The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) – who are they and why are they important to me?

The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services or CMS is the government agency that has the task of administering the Medicare program. They interpret and implement the laws passed by Congress that affect Medicare. CMS is continually updating the Medicare rules and rendering decisions on controversial issues

With the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, changes were made to Medicare to allow more flexibility in billing for services of PAs. PAs are now recognized Medicare providers and may bill under their own provider identification number (UPIN). Some other changes important to PAs include:

- Services performed by a physician assistant, which the physician assistant is legally authorized to perform by the state law, are covered in all settings (hospital, out patient, nursing home, etc.).
- The rates of payment for services provided by PAs is now set at a uniform 85% of the physician fee schedule in all settings. PAs may still bill “incident to” at 100% of the physician fee schedule provided certain requirements are met including on-site supervision. (NPs bill at 85% as well.)
- New language provides more flexibility in the business arrangements between PAs and their physician supervisors/employers or between PAs and the companies for which they work; i.e. independent contractors.
- PAs are still required to accept assignment when treating Medicare beneficiaries.

The first bullet point is important in that it clearly states national Medicare policy does not add any restrictions to our scope to practice. Certain things are reserved for physicians alone: certifying necessity of home health services is one example.

Most of the difficulty with Medicare rules comes at the local level. There are local agencies that make local Medicare rules; in Wisconsin it is WPS (Wisconsin Physicians Service). Often times, local Medicare policies directly contradict national Medicare policies.

The AAPA and CMS will work to resolve these national – local policy conflicts as they arise. Recently, we worked with local PAs, the AAPA and CMS to resolve national – local policy conflicts over the ability of PAs to order physical restraints. Please contact me if you have any questions!