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CMS limits proposed Medicare cuts to radiation oncology

ASTRO very pleased by decision to significantly lessen, phase in cuts

Fairfax, Va., November 2, 2009 – ASTRO, the American Society for Radiation Oncology, today praised the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) for limiting the payment reductions initially proposed for radiation oncology and spreading the remaining cuts over four years.

ASTRO had asked CMS to not implement proposed changes to the Medicare policies and payment rates for physician services that would have cut radiation oncology services by 19 percent, with certain services being cut by up to 44 percent. An ASTRO survey conducted in July indicated cuts of this scale would have a particularly devastating effect on community-based cancer centers and the patients they treat. The final rule released on October 30 is slated to reduce radiation oncology payments by only 5 percent over a four-year period. In other words, the proposed 19 percent cut for next year has been significantly reduced to only about a 1 percent cut for 2010.

“CMS’s important action will allow radiation oncologists, particularly those working in community-based practices, to continue providing lifesaving radiation treatments for cancer patients. Keeping these clinics open and continuing to see Medicare beneficiaries with cancer will ensure cancer patients have local access to their essential daily treatments,” ASTRO Chair Patricia Eifel, M.D., FASTRO, a radiation oncologist at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, said.

In response to the July 13 Medicare physician fee schedule proposed rule, ASTRO wrote CMS urging it to withdraw its proposal to increase the equipment utilization rate for radiation therapy from 50 percent to 90 percent for equipment costing more than \$1 million. ASTRO also asked CMS to make significant adjustments to the physician practice information survey data for radiation oncology and delay its implementation until changes were made. In its final rule, CMS agreed with ASTRO that the proposed increase on the assumed equipment utilization rate for equipment should not apply to radiation therapy equipment. In addition, CMS

agreed with most of ASTRO's recommendations regarding the physician practice expense survey information, making several important adjustments specific to radiation oncology.

“ASTRO is very pleased by CMS’s final decision and remains committed to working with the Obama administration and Congress to ensure that healthcare reform moves forward and provides cancer patients with coverage and access to important radiation oncology services. Proposals to expand coverage by providing subsidies to lower-income individuals and insurance market reforms that ban pre-existing conditions and limits on annual and lifetime benefits will help protect that patients served by our members,” Laura I. Thevenot, ASTRO’s chief executive officer said.

ASTRO also deeply appreciates the more than 100 members of Congress who wrote Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius to express serious concerns about the impact of the proposed cuts on cancer patient care in their communities and to object to the proposed cuts. In particular, ASTRO is grateful for the tremendous leadership of Reps. Lois Capps (D-Calif.), Sue Myrick (R-N.C.), Mike Rogers (R-Mich.) and Parker Griffith (D-Ala.) and Sens. Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.) and Richard Burr (R-N.C.) for spearheading efforts to stop the proposed cuts.

Letters from Congress, ASTRO comment letters and other materials on the cuts can be found at www.astro.org/medicarecuts.

ASTRO is the largest radiation oncology society in the world, with more than 10,000 members who specialize in treating patients with radiation therapies. As the leading organization in radiation oncology, biology and physics, the Society is dedicated to improving patient care through education, clinical practice, advancement of science and advocacy. For more information on radiation therapy, visit www.rtanswers.org. To learn more about ASTRO, visit www.astro.org.

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