

March 19, 2020

Vincent Nelson, MD
Vice President, Medical Affairs and Interim Chief Medical Officer
Blue Cross Blue Shield Association
225 North Michigan Ave.
Chicago, IL 60601
Vincent.Nelson@bcbsa.com

Dear Dr. Nelson:

Over the past week, the American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO)¹ has been actively working with our membership on efforts to address COVID-19. As radiation oncology practices grapple with major changes and disruptions due to the virus, **we urge Blue Cross Blue Shield Association (BCBSA) to suspend prior authorization requirements for radiation therapy services for the duration of the COVID-19 public health emergency.**

Radiation oncology clinics are making widespread and unprecedented practice changes to continue treating cancer patients and support broader health care system efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19, but the fact remains that cancer patients are immunocompromised. Their diminished ability to fight infections and disease makes it imperative that these patients receive treatment as soon as possible and with as few obstacles as possible during this turbulent time.

Data from China indicates that cancer patients are at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 and have poorer outcomes once infected. Radiation oncologists and their care team members are also at risk of infection given their direct interaction with patients. Practices are mitigating the spread of disease by asking all non-treating staff, such as administrative and billing staff, to work remotely. When working remotely, staff do not have access to fax machines, which are commonly used for the submission of prior authorization documents as required by many benefit management companies and payers. This makes much of the prior authorization process impossible. Additionally, radiation oncologists and other clinical care team members are being diverted to COVID-19 response activities - performing entry point screening, documenting travel history, and more. The reduction in staff leaves practices without the manpower necessary to complete the prior authorization process.

The Trump Administration is actively reducing obstacles to care, including prior authorization, during the COVID-19 public health emergency. On March 13, 2020, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Alex Azar, announced new flexibilities under section 1135 of the Social Security Act that allow State Medicaid programs to apply for waivers temporarily suspending existing requirements to promote access to care. As part of this effort, the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has already approved several waivers for the state of Florida, most notably a *Waiver of Service Prior Authorization*

¹ *ASTRO members are medical professionals, who practice at hospitals and cancer treatment centers in the United States and around the globe and make up the radiation therapy treatment teams that are critical in the fight against cancer. These teams often include radiation oncologists, medical physicists, medical dosimetrists, radiation therapists, oncology nurses, nutritionists and social workers, and treat more than one million cancer patients each year. We believe this multi-disciplinary membership makes us uniquely qualified to provide input on the inherently complex issues related to Medicare payment policy and coding for radiation oncology services.*

(PA) Requirements for Medicaid patients². We urge BCBSA to follow this example and minimize disruptions to cancer patients receiving radiation therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Should you have any questions or wish to discuss our recommendations further, please contact Jessica Adams, Health Policy Analyst (703) 839-7396 or via email at Jessica.adams@astro.org. Thank you for your consideration of our urgent request, and we look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laura Thevenot".

Laura I. Thevenot
Chief Executive Officer

² <https://www.medicaid.gov/state-resource-center/downloads/fl-section-1135-appvl.pdf>