ASTRO commends Sens. Burr and Stabenow for efforts to halt proposed Medicare cuts to radiation oncology

Fairfax, Va., August 5, 2015 – ASTRO applauds and thanks U.S. Senators Richard Burr (R-N.C.) and Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) for their bipartisan leadership on behalf of cancer patients in working to stop proposed Medicare payment cuts to radiation oncology cancer care. Senators Burr and Stabenow are asking their Senate colleagues for bipartisan support to tell the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to reconsider their proposed cuts to radiation oncology in the recently issued Medicare Physician Fee Schedule (MPFS) for 2016.

The proposed 2016 MPFS recommends reducing physician payments to radiation oncology, including cuts of about five to seven percent to community-based cancer clinics—potentially higher for some centers depending on their patient populations. In their letter, the two Senators expressed “serious concern” that these cuts will have a significant impact on community-based centers and those that serve patients in rural areas, especially given that these same centers had payment reductions totalling nearly 20 percent during the last six years. ASTRO represents radiation oncology physicians practicing in hospitals and community-based clinics and will submit comments and recommendations in a letter to CMS by September 8, 2015.

“We are thrilled and grateful that Senators Burr and Stabenow once again have proven their bipartisan commitment to fighting for cancer patients’ access to life-saving radiation therapy treatments,” said ASTRO Chair Bruce G. Haffty, MD, FASTRO. “Senators Burr and Stabenow are truly champions for cancer patients, and we look forward to working with them, with their Senate colleagues and with CMS to push back on these devastating Medicare cuts.”

Preliminary data from ASTRO’s approximately two-week survey, from July 9 through July 20, of the almost 1,400 community-based radiation therapy centers in the U.S. indicates that with
reimbursement cuts of five to 10 percent, nearly 30 percent of the practices may have to close their doors; approximately 62 percent may have to consolidate practice locations; and an estimated 41 percent of practices may be forced to discontinue accepting patients covered by Medicare.

“We recognize the valuable role community-based radiation therapy plays in meeting patients’ oncology needs, and we are concerned that the proposed cuts could further jeopardize patient access to this treatment option,” wrote Senators Burr and Stabenow.

The most significant portion of the cuts is due to an abrupt change in several policies including setting values for newly created and revised radiation treatment delivery codes; increasing the assumed equipment utilization rate for linear accelerators used in cancer treatment; and removing the costs associated with several essential direct practice expense inputs, most notably on-board imaging, which ensures safe and accurate radiation treatments.

While ASTRO anticipated some payment reductions as a result of the new code values, the additional impact of both the equipment utilization rate change and the removal of direct practice expense inputs represents too much, too fast for community-based clinics to absorb and could have devastating effects, particularly for those centers in rural and underserved areas.

“ASTRO urges all senators to sign the Burr/Stabenow letter to help protect patient access to critical radiation therapy services in their communities,” concluded Haffty.

ABOUT ASTRO

ASTRO is the premier radiation oncology society in the world, with more than 10,000 members who are physicians, nurses, biologists, physicists, radiation therapists, dosimetrists and other health care professionals that specialize in treating patients with radiation therapies. As the leading organization in radiation oncology, the Society is dedicated to improving patient care through professional education and training, support for clinical practice and health policy standards, advancement of science and research, and advocacy. ASTRO publishes three medical journals, International Journal of Radiation Oncology • Biology • Physics (www.redjournal.org), Practical Radiation Oncology (www.practicalradonc.org) and Advances in Radiation Oncology; developed and maintains an extensive patient website, www.rtanswers.org; and created the Radiation Oncology Institute (www.roinstitute.org), a non-profit foundation to support research and education efforts around the world that enhance and confirm the critical role of radiation therapy in improving cancer treatment. To learn more about ASTRO, visit www.astro.org.

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