



Sierra Sacramento Valley Medicine
Vol. 60 / No. 2 - Mar / Apr 2009

Letters to the Editor

The Stimulus Package and Electronic Health Records

THE ECONOMIC STIMULUS PACKAGE recently passed by Congress included \$19 billion for health information technology (HIT), the vast majority of which will be directed to physicians to subsidize the purchase and usage of Electronic Health Records (EHR) systems. Qualifying Medicare providers stand to gain up to \$44,000 under the program; qualifying Medi-Cal providers stand to receive as much as \$65,000. These funds are predicated on physicians using EHRs, so practices and groups that already have purchased EHR systems can also qualify for funds.

In all the conversations about HIT over the years, this is the first real effort to steer substantial resources to physicians to help them with the adoption of technologies to help streamline and improve their practices. CMA has long advocated for such direct assistance, which is critical to physicians' ability to afford these systems, particularly for solo and small practice doctors. Without physician input, these funds may have been steered through hospitals or health insurers, or not allocated at all.

As significant an opportunity as these funds are, they do not come without strings. Physicians will be required to demonstrate meaningful usage of EHR systems, which will include participating in a health information exchange and reporting on quality measures. Additionally, physicians who don't use EHRs will face a 1 percent cut in Medicare payments beginning in 2015. That cut will grow to 2 percent in 2016 and 3 percent in each year thereafter.

Many of you likely have questions about what this means for your practice, and what you need to do to position your practice to receive these funds. While many of the details and standards for qualifying as an EHR user have yet to be worked out, CMA is ready to help you navigate this process whether you already use an EHR system or are considering purchasing one.

For the most up-to-date information, I invite you to visit CMA's online HIT Resource Center at: www.cmanet.org/HIT.

One piece of information is important for you to know right now. I know that many of you have been receiving calls from EHR vendors urging you to buy their product now to take advantage of the federal stimulus funds. However, given the lack of clarity about what EHR systems will qualify a physician to receive the federal subsidy, CMA believes that now is not the time to rush out and purchase an EHR system.

There is no benefit in rushing to purchase a system. The standards to determine which EHR systems will qualify for the physician subsidy will be worked out in the coming months.

For now, CMA advises that you begin assessing your HIT needs, with an eye on what will work best for your specialty, the size of your practice, the stage in your career, and your comfort level with technology. Once the standards are developed, CMA will develop a marketplace of vendors with federally qualified EHR systems, complete with information about each that will assist you in choosing the right one for your practice. For physicians who already use an EHR system, CMA will provide more information on how to ensure your system qualifies once the standards are developed.

For the rest of the information, and answers to your questions, please visit CMA's HIT Resource Center. CMA is closely monitoring the standards development process, and will be updating the Resource Center as new information becomes available.

— Joseph L. Dunn, Chief Executive Officer, California Medical Association