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Medicare docs can get bonuses for using EHRs and e-prescribing in 2008

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For the first time, the Medicare program will pay bonuses to doctors and other health care providers for using electronic health records and e-prescribing in 2008.

Use of the two technologies are among 119 quality measures that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services listed in an official notice of its payment rules for the coming year.

To qualify for a bonus of as much as 1.5 percent of their Medicare fees, doctors can report their compliance with as many as three of the 119 measures. A pool of \$1.35 billion will be available to pay incentives next year.

The new measures for health information technology usage are the first of what the agency calls structural quality measures because they relate to the system for delivering care. The other measures relate to direct patient care or outcomes of that care.

In its notice about the new rates, CMS also modified an earlier change of policy related to e-prescribing. Previously, it had told doctors that those who wished to use e-prescribing under Medicare Part D must stop using computer-generated faxes and begin using true e-prescribing on Jan. 1, 2008.

In its final rule, CMS extended the effective date for a year and will also allow computer-generated faxes during temporary computer crashes and communications glitches. According to an agency news release, the year's grace period "is intended to allow all prescribers and dispensers adequate time to obtain or upgrade existing software."

Some of the 900,000 providers who bill Medicare for services provided to elderly patients and those with disabilities have never been eligible for incentives because there are no quality measures for their specialties. Speech pathologists, for example, have told CMS they feel left out of the bonus program.

Now providers in those specialties can receive bonuses if they use EHRs or e-prescribing.

CMS is expected to post information online by the end of the month detailing how it will implement the new quality measures.

The payment notice will be published in the Nov. 27 Federal Register and is available now on the CMS Web site.

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