

Speaking Out for What Is Right

The right drug for the right patient at the right time.” It’s a phrase heard often these days as issues of safety, efficacy, and the cost of health care dominate many discussions on the state of modern medicine. It is also a focus at SNM as we continue to spread the word—that nuclear medicine and molecular imaging are safe, accurate procedures deserving reasonable reimbursement—to both government agencies and members of the public.

Since 1954, SNM has pioneered advances in the nuclear medicine community to improve diagnostic accuracy and optimize patient care. Recently, we have widened our scope to include other medical modalities, such as molecular imaging. Readers of this journal cannot help but be aware that more and more research shows that molecular imaging allows researchers to not only see what is going on in each individual patient but also predict outcomes, thereby enabling physicians to better diagnose and manage treatment.

Our current challenge, therefore, lies not in providing positive results—the research speaks clearly to that—but in bringing the rest of the world up to date on these life-saving advancements. To do this, we must craft the right message for the right audience for the right response.

SNM is uniquely qualified to carry the message that molecular imaging provides safe, state-of-the-art, and customized care for patients. It is a responsibility we take seriously and fulfill in a variety of ways. For example, in late January, SNM sent a response to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) regarding the Hospital Outpatient Prospective Payment System final rule for calendar year 2008. In our response, we questioned CMS’s decision to pay less than the acquisition cost for radiopharmaceuticals based on their method of “bundling” all of these types of drugs into the ambulatory payment classification category of “Nuclear Medicine.”

Part of the problem stems from CMS incorrectly designating radiopharmaceuticals as supplies used for imaging procedures rather than as drugs. As we explained in our comments to CMS, “Radiopharmaceuticals are a major cost component of many nuclear medicine procedures, often exceeding the cost of the imaging or therapeutic procedure itself.” Furthermore, rather than using each individual hospital’s current expenses as a means to calculate reimbursement, CMS relies on data from as far back as 2003 to determine acceptable costs for radiopharmaceuticals produced in 2008.

It is our view that bundling drug costs and using inaccurate hospital claims data result in severely under-reimbursing for use of some radiopharmaceuticals, which discourages many physicians from prescribing these potentially helpful treatments at many hospitals. This in turn discourages private insurers’ coverage of the drugs, because many companies base their reim-

bursements on those of CMS. SNM remains concerned about the potential negative impact that bundling without accurate cost data may have on the development of new and more specific biological radiopharmaceuticals.

Fortunately, in passing the Medicare, Medicaid, and State Children’s Health Insurance Program Extension Act of 2007, Congress temporarily extended the 2007 payment methodology for therapeutic radiopharmaceuticals for the first 6 months of 2008 (through June 30). Although this stopgap may offer a respite to patients and medical personnel, it is not a solution to the problem. SNM has made it clear that we would like to continue to work with CMS to arrive at the best reimbursement method possible, one that more accurately reflects the cost of production, transportation, and administration of these life-saving drugs.

Speaking out to government agencies is only part of the story here at SNM. We have lately recognized the need to help the general public better understand the benefits of molecular imaging. At the same time we recognize our responsibility to a great many programs that more directly concern our society’s 16,000 members, such as continuing education, quality assurance—particularly in the area of PET validation—and the newly created centers of excellence (PET and molecular imaging).

To maintain the quality of these and other efforts and continue to carry our message forward, we have recently joined forces with Porter Novelli, Inc., a nationally recognized public relations firm. Porter Novelli has planned a public relations campaign that will reach a broad array of audiences and outlets to help realize SNM’s goal of advancing molecular imaging and therapy.

The campaign is designed to build awareness for molecular imaging among medical professionals, the scientific community, and, to the extent possible, mainstream media and the general public. To accomplish this goal, we will work with them to develop clear messages and materials and will actively reach out to key news outlets. In addition, Porter Novelli will help run and promote SNM’s Annual Meeting and the research released there. Don’t be surprised to hear or see more about advances in nuclear medicine and molecular imaging one day soon on radio and television and in the newspaper.

“The right drug for the right patient at the right time.” That’s the right message and a timely one. Now it’s time to speak out and tell what SNM is doing to make it happen.



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