OHTA Advises HCFA to Deny Medicare Coverage for SPA and DPA
Bone Mineral Studies

The Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA), which sets Medicare reimbursement policies, is now preparing two Federal Register notices announcing HCFA's proposal to withdraw coverage of single-photon absorptiometry (SPA) and to deny coverage of dual-photon absorptiometry (DPA). These notices will be open to public comment. (Medicare has reimbursed for SPA since 1982, and has never reimbursed for DPA.)

For the past few years, there has been controversy over the precision of these techniques, the clinical value of results, and the inconsistent reimbursement policies of third-party payers (see Newsline, March 1987, pp. 267-276).

Late last year, the Office of Health Technology Assessment (OHTA) finished its comprehensive two-year review of SPA and DPA, and recommended to HCFA that Medicare not reimburse payments for these studies.

The OHTA gave three main reasons against Medicare coverage of SPA and DPA: (1) bone mineral density measurements can discriminate between osteoporotic and normal populations, but not between an osteoporotic individual and a normal population; (2) "there has been no prospective study" demonstrating that noninvasive measurements of bone mass can identify which patients will suffer from fractures; (3) there is controversy over the most appropriate site to measure. In addition, the OHTA said that investigators have not distinguished between the use of DPA in clinical research versus routine clinical practice, and that "the suitability of SPA for monitoring bone loss or the effectiveness of treatment is controversial." HCFA is not obligated to follow OHTA recommendations, although it usually does.

The Society of Nuclear Medicine (SNM) and the American College of Nuclear Physicians (ACNP) set up the SNM/ACNP Task Force on Reimbursement for Bone Mineral Density Studies last spring. The task force, which disagrees with the OHTA's conclusions about SPA and DPA, is examining specific indications—physiologic, drug-related, and disease-related clinical situations associated with a high incidence of osteopenia—for bone density measurements that will influence diagnosis and medical decision-making.

[Copies of the Health Technology Assessment Reports, 1986 (DPA is Report No. 6, SPA is Report No. 7), may be obtained from: Publications and Information Branch, NCHSR & HCTA, Parklawn Bldg., Rm. 18-12, 5600 Fishers Ld., Rockville, MD 20857 (301)443-4100.]

SNM Instrumentation Council Promotes Use of Electronic Mail

The Society of Nuclear Medicine (SNM) Instrumentation Council has formed a committee to encourage the use of electronic mail within the SNM. Chaired by Trevor D. Cradduck, PhD, of Victoria Hospital in London, Ontario, Canada, the committee plans to establish a directory of nuclear medicine users who have access to the BITNET computer network. "Electronic mail provides a simple and efficient way of communicating with colleagues on the same campus or at institutions around the world. Any department that has a computer link to a university main-frame computer almost certainly has an electronic mail facility at its disposal—probably without realizing it," said Dr. Cradduck.

Universities throughout the world are linked by one computer network that is called BITNET in the United States, NETNORTH in Canada, and EARN (European Academic and Research Network) in Europe. There are also "gateways" to a number of other networks, such as UUCP (Unix-to-Unix Communications Protocol), ARPA (Advanced Research Projects Agency), MTS (Michigan Time-Sharing Network), DFN (Germany), and OZ or AU (Australia).

"At last count, we could access as many as 48 remote networks or domains from our local university mail system. Each domain, of course, has a multitude of nodes or computer systems attached to it, and the list is changing daily," said Dr. Cradduck.

Although an electronic bulletin board cannot be set up with BITNET, Dr. Cradduck is willing to use his address (TREVOR@UWOVAX, with an "oh," not a zero) as a center from which messages can be circulated to all known subscribers in the nuclear medicine BITNET directory. In addition, Stewart M. Spies, MD, of Northwestern University in Chicago, has offered to allow SNM members use of a bulletin board he has set up for the Instrumentation Council. It can be accessed at (312)908-1451, and operates at 300, 1,200, or 2,400 baud.

[For more information on joining the SNM electronic mail system, contact: Trevor D. Cradduck, PhD, Nuclear Medicine Dept., Victoria Hospital, 375 South St., London, Ontario, Canada N6A 4G5 (519)667-6574. For information on the electronic bulletin board, contact: Stewart Spies, MD, (312)908-2516. ]