California Limits CT Radiation

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) has signed a bill that limits the radiation dose provided in computed tomography scans. The new law comes in the wake of patients at at least six California hospitals having received up to eight times the normal radiation from their CT scans. Beginning in 2012, technicians must record the radiation dose from every scan, and radiology reports must include that information. Each year, a medical physicist will be required to confirm each CT machine’s readings. Beginning in 2013, medical imaging facilities need to report to the state any medical injury from CT radiation and any instance in which certain doses have been exceeded.

Off-Label Promotion Targeted

The Food and Drug Administration is warning that it will pursue disciplinary action against physicians, other practitioners, and manufacturers that promote medical devices for off-label uses, according to new regulations. The FDA’s Office of Compliance initiated a warning that it will pursue disciplinary action against physicians, other practitioners, and manufacturers that promote medical devices for off-label uses, according to new regulations. The FDA’s Office of Compliance initiated a warning that it will pursue disciplinary action against physicians, other practitioners, and manufacturers that promote medical devices for off-label uses, according to new regulations.

Stop-Smoking Coverage Expanded

Physicians will be reimbursed for counseling patients on smoking cessation, not just those with tobacco-related illness, under new guidelines approved by the CMS. Previously, a patient needed to at least show signs of illness related to smoking before Medicare would pay. Now, any smoker covered by Medicare can have up to eight smoking cessation sessions per year from a physician or another Medicare-recognized health practitioner, CMS said. American Medical Association President Cecil Wilson applauded the coverage expansion. “More than 400,000 Americans die needlessly every year as a direct result of tobacco use,” Dr. Wilson said in a statement. “This expansion of coverage takes an important step toward helping Medicare patients lead healthier, tobacco-free lives.”

Productivity, Ownership Linked

Billable work per patient appears to be increasing only at physician groups under the “private practice model,” but expenses have also grown, according to a Medical Group Management Association study. Over the past few years, relative value unit per patient rose by 13% at private medical practices, but declined nearly 18% at practices owned by hospitals or integrated delivery systems, analysts found. Meanwhile, operating costs for private practices increased by nearly 2% last year, in contrast to a slight decline for practices owned by the larger entities. MGMA attributed part of the increase in expenses for private practices to the cost of implementing electronic health record systems. “In the private practice model, EHR incentives have provided a catalyst for practices to purchase systems and deploy electronic health records, therefore increasing the practice’s information technology expenditures,” said Kenneth Hertz, a principal with MGMA’s Health Care Consulting Group, in a statement.

Outcomes Research Funded

HHS will provide grants totaling nearly $17 million for “patient-centered outcomes research” (PCOR), which focuses on treatments and strategies that might improve health outcomes from the patient’s point of view. Most of the announced grants will support outcomes research in primary care, HHS said. As part of the grant program, five health organizations will attempt to show that providers and academic institutions can partner on PCOR. Each organization – AAMC: Minority Enrollment in Med School Up in 2010

BY JANE ANDERSON
FROM A REPORT BY THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN MEDICAL COLLEGES

More minority students enrolled in first-year medical students in 2010, with Hispanic male medical students especially increasing their numbers, according to new data released by the Association of American Medical Colleges. The number of black/African American and American Indian first-year medical students also grew this year, and every U.S. region saw increases in medical school enrollment diversity, said AAMC President and CEO Dr. Darrell Kirch.

Hispanic men saw the largest hike in enrollment in 2010, by 17% over 2009. Enrollment by Hispanic women grew by 1.6%, yielding a total increase of 9% by Hispanics.

Asian students also saw gains, with enrollment increasing 2.4% in 2010 to 4,214 from 4,114 in 2009, according to the AAMC report. Overall, the level of applicants to U.S. medical schools has remained steady for at least the past 4 years, although the total number of first-time applicants increased by 2.5% in 2010, said Dr. Kirch.

Medical school remains a very compelling career choice, he said. About 42,000 potential students, including 31,063 first-time applicants, competed for about 18,000 openings, he said.

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About 53% of applicants were male and 47% were female; men also outnumbered women first-year enrollees by 53% to 47%, the report shows.

One new medical school – the Virginia Tech Carilion Medical School – accepted its first class this year, and two more are in line to accept their first classes next year, Dr. Kirch said. Another seven medical schools are in the accreditation process, he said.

“This effort to expand medical school enrollment will enable us to add 7,000 more annual graduates,” he said, adding, “we’re not focused solely on new schools. We’re also focused on [increasing enrollment at] existing schools.”

But increased medical school enrollment won’t help the looming shortage of physicians unless the number of residency slots also increases, Dr. Kirch warned. AAMC advocates about a 15% increase in the number of residency slots, he said.

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