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March 3, 2021

The MMS will continue to monitor developments related to the coronavirus (COVID-19) and the response by state and federal agencies. For current information, including updates from NEJM, visit the dedicated page on the MMS website: massmed.org/covid-19.

Practice Management

Caring for the Caregiver: MHA Task Force briefing

In a first-of-its-kind examination of workforce challenges, leaders from across the Massachusetts health care community joined together to form the Caring for the Caregiver Task Force, convened by the Massachusetts Health & Hospital Association (MHA). Task Force membership was representative of the wider health care continuum, including hospitals, behavioral health, home care, secondary education, community providers, patient and family advocacy, government and independent regulatory organizations, nursing and physician organizations, and insurers. Massachusetts Medical Society (MMS) Executive Vice President Lois Cornell will participate in a panel discussion to roll out the findings. To register, click here.

CMS quality reporting for COVID-19 vaccine shots
The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) will support efforts to encourage COVID-19 vaccination through its quality and value-based incentive programs. CMS is partnering with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to develop quality measures to reflect both patient and personnel vaccination measures to be used in appropriate programs such as nursing homes and dialysis facilities.

In addition, as a reminder, CMS offers credit in the provider merit-based incentive payment system (MIPS) program for participation in COVID-19 clinical trials and clinical registries, offering points for improvement activities.

FDA allows more flexible storage, transportation conditions for Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that it is allowing undiluted frozen vials of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine to be transported and stored at conventional temperatures commonly found in pharmaceutical freezers for a period of up to two weeks. This reflects an alternative to the preferred storage of the undiluted vials in an ultra-low temperature freezer between -80°C to -60°C (-112°F to -76°F). The change is being reflected in updates to the fact sheet for health care providers administering vaccine (vaccination providers).

Pfizer Inc. submitted data demonstrating that their COVID-19 vaccine remains stable after storage of the undiluted vials for up to two weeks at standard freezer temperature.

CMS holds physicians harmless from MIPS penalties amid COVID-19 PHE

The Extreme and Uncontrollable Circumstances Hardship Exception policy will be automatically applied to all merit-based incentive payment system (MIPS)-eligible clinicians who do not submit any MIPS data for the 2020 performance period and avoid a 2022 payment penalty. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) is also reopening the hardship exception application for group practices, virtual groups, and
alternative payment model entities who missed the previous 2020 deadline. The re-opened application deadline is March 31, 2021. Groups and eligible clinicians who submit data in at least two MIPS categories will override the hardship exception and be eligible to earn a bonus from the exceptional performance bonus pool or potentially be subject to a penalty.