5 physician specialties hit hardest in pandemic’s early days

Research from the AMA shows the pandemic's unprecedented impact on Medicare physician spending during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also sheds light on how the impact varied greatly by medical or surgical specialty.

The new report, “Changes in Medicare Physician Spending During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” features an analysis of Medicare claims data exclusive to physician services. Researchers found spending dropped as much as 57% below expected pre-pandemic levels in April 2020. Medicare spending on physician services partially recovered from the April low but was still 12% less than expected by the end of June 2020.

During the first half of 2020, the cumulative estimated reduction in Medicare physician spending associated with the pandemic was $9.4 billion—19%.

“The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has placed significant financial stress on medical practices as expenses have spiked and revenues have dropped,” said AMA President Susan R. Bailey, MD. “For practices that have struggled to remain viable as the pandemic stretches on, many will face a difficult and precarious road to recovery. The AMA report adds new insight on the economic impact of the pandemic that has threatened the viability of physicians who participate in Medicare.”

When compared with expected 2020 Medicare spending on physician services, the AMA report shows that actual Medicare spending on physician services for the first six months of 2020 fell regardless of service type, setting or specialty, and state or region.

Reductions in cumulative spending over the first half of 2020 did vary widely among the top specialties examined. These five physician specialties saw the biggest drops in Medicare physician spending:

- Ophthalmology—29% drop
- Otolaryngology—28%
- Gastroenterology—25%
- Dermatology—24%
Specialties seeing the smallest impact—spending drops of less than 10%—include nephrology, radiation oncology and hematology-oncology.

BHI collaborative outreach brief

The Behavioral Health Integration (BHI) Collaborative, a partnership between the AMA and seven other leading physician organizations, is launching a research study in 2021 to gather feedback and experiences from primary care physician practices who are interested in integrating behavioral health care for their patients. The study will run through April, and participation includes a 45-minute interview and completion of a series of online activities. Participation will allow practice representatives to share valuable feedback on resources that will ultimately help make integrating behavioral health care a feasible, standard practice in primary care, rather than an exception. March 26 is the last day to fill out the screening questions for research participation. Learn more and respond to a series of screening questions to see if your practice qualifies.

AMA joins historic effort to boost vaccine confidence

The Ad Council and COVID Collaborative have launched “It’s Up to You,” a national campaign to ensure patients feel empowered to make informed choices for themselves and their families about COVID-19 vaccines. As a trusted voice during these uncertain times, the AMA encourages you to share campaign resources with your patients. For more COVID-19 messaging recommendations, please check out the new COVID-19 vaccines guide for physicians.

AMA Guides Sixth Edition 2021 update launches April 1

The AMA Guides Editorial Panel will meet on March 18, at 6 p.m. Central, for a town hall meeting focused on the AMA Guides Sixth Edition 2021 update, which will be released on AMA Guides Digital on April 1. The AMA will consider the AMA Guides Digital content to most current version of AMA Guides as of July 1. The AMA encourages independent medical evaluators, legal professionals and regulators to become familiar with the updates to the AMA Guides Sixth Edition prior to the content becoming effective. All states that designate use of AMA Guides Sixth Edition AMA Guides are encouraged to adopt AMA Guides Sixth Edition 2021 to provide clear guidance regarding the use of AMA Guides Sixth Edition 2021 to relevant stakeholders.
AMA Guides Sixth Edition 2021 will be supported by the AMA Ed Hub™ educational module. Gain a thorough understanding of how the AMA Guides Sixth Edition 2021 update will impact impairment rating methodology. Up to 0.25 PRA Category 1 Credit may be available.

Experts from the North American Spine Society and a traumatic brain injury (TBI) work group are evaluating spine and TBI content, respectively, for the AMA Guides Sixth Edition 2022 update. After the proposals are submitted to the Panel, a public comment period will follow, providing societies and interested parties the opportunity to review the proposals and submit comments for Panel consideration.

Sign up to virtually attend the AMA Guides Editorial Panel meetings.

- March 18
- April 15
- May 20

Learn more about AMA Guides Digital, read about submitting a change proposal or review the FAQs. For more information, contact amaguides@ama-assn.org.

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