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Medicare to Provide Preventive Care Services in 2005

By Felisha L. Thomas

In January, Medicare, which pays most of the health care costs for approximately 40 million elderly and disabled Americans, began offering preventive services. The services are targeted at reducing chronic diseases, including diabetes, heart disease, and osteoporosis, which cost the U.S. economy billions of dollars each year.

According to former Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson, 99 percent of all Medicare spending goes toward treatment for people who are already sick. In comparison, 70 percent of all U.S. health care spending is on chronic diseases, which can generally be lessened in severity with early detection. Thompson says this has to change, and he

expects Medicare to be the leader in redirecting more of the nation's \$1.5 trillion in annual health spending to preventive services.

Starting on January 1, Medicare began covering preventive care, which includes a one-time physical for seniors entering the Medicare system. According to the Center for Medicare Education, the initial routine physical includes measurement of height, weight, and blood pressure, as well as an electrocardiogram. Additionally, it will include education and counseling on such things as weight control and smoking cessation, as well as referrals to other preventive services covered by Medicare. This exam must be performed within six months of enrollment in Medicare Part B. Medicare will continue its policy of not covering routine check-ups after the first exam. Lab tests are also not included under the new plan, unless the patient is at high risk for diabetes or heart disease. Cholesterol and blood lipid screening tests will be available every two years, and pre-

scription drug coverage will be offered starting in 2006.

"The goal is to ultimately start new enrollees off on the right path and to identify potential problems," said Greg Chesmore, public affairs coordinator of the Center of Medicare and Medicaid Services of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources. "If we can identify potential problems early, it ultimately benefits everyone."

Opponents of the bill say that the new law funnels too much money to insurers and drug companies, and not enough to patients. Also, according to a June 2004 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, some seniors have

been confused about the law's details and how it will be administered. According to the study, many seniors had no idea that the new

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Medicare plan includes additional preventive benefits. When informed that the new preventive benefits include a one-time physical exam and screening tests for diabetes and heart disease, a bit more than half were favorable, while the rest were either unfavorable or had no strong opinion. Most seniors in the study viewed the initial physical exam and screening tests as positive ways of keeping seniors healthy. However, some felt that the exams should be offered yearly to all, and not just to new enrollees of Medicare.

In response to the criticism that the exams should be available to all, not just new enrollees, Chesmore stated, "Anyone that exhibits signs or symptoms of a particular illness will have the necessary exams covered by Medicare."