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CMS 'Dashboard' May Spur New Studies on Costs and Use of Health Care Services

By John Reichard, CQ HealthBeat Editor

April 7, 2010 -- The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has launched a new Web site offering researchers access to data on the cost and utilization of health care services around the United States.

Dubbed by CMS the "Medicare Dashboard," the agency said in a memo to congressional staff that data available on the site "can help decision makers quickly compare utilization rates of hospitals around the state and country."

Researchers have long urged Medicare to give them wider access to such data so they can unearth ways to improve the efficiency of health care.

The claims data on the Data.gov is current as of March 2010 for patients discharged from the hospital from January 2006 to December 2009. The Dashboard does not include data on beneficiaries enrolled in Medicare Advantage, the private health plan side of Medicare.

The memo also notes that Medicare claim "basic files" will be released this fall on the Web site. To be released from September to December 2010, the files cover all types of care for a 5 percent sample of enrollees in the traditional, fee-for-service side of Medicare. These claims will not be linked to individual providers or patients.

Other data to be released by CMS for free include the "Medicare Part B Summary File," which gives the volume of physician services for various procedures and total Medicare spending for those procedures.

CMS also will be making available online each state's Medicaid plan. The plans specify what benefits are provided and which populations are covered.

The Obama administration says the data release is part of its "Open Government Directive" to promote "transparency, participation, and collaboration."

President Obama said in a statement Wednesday that "for too long, Washington has closed itself off from the oversight of the American public, resulting in information that's difficult to find, taxpayer dollars that disappear without a trace and lobbyists that wield undue influence."

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The Commonwealth Fund New York City Headquarters: 1 East 75th Street, New York, NY 10021 Phone: 212.606.3800 Fax: 212.606.3500; Washington, D.C., Office: 1150 17th Street, NW, Suite 600, Washington, D.C., 20036; E-mail: info@cmwf.org