



VERMONT ASSOCIATION OF
HOSPITALS AND HEALTH SYSTEMS

Submitted Electronically

May 27, 2011

The Honorable Christine Varney
Assistant Attorney General
Antitrust Division
United States Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20530

The Honorable Jon Leibowitz
Chairman
Federal Trade Commission
600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20580

Re: Proposed Statement of Antitrust Enforcement Policy Regarding ACOs Participating in the Medicare Shared Savings Program, Matter V100017

Dear Assistant Attorney General Varney and Commissioner Leibowitz:

On behalf of the Vermont Association of Hospitals and Health Systems and our fourteen non-profit, tax exempt member hospitals, we welcome this opportunity to provide comments to your respective agencies on the Proposed Statement of Antitrust Enforcement Policy Regarding Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs) Participating in the Medicare Shared Savings Program (Statement). We very much appreciate the antitrust agencies' recognition of the importance of integrated health organizations, like ACOs, and the historic effort to work cooperatively with other federal agencies to craft a legal and regulatory framework for the Medicare program.

As background, Vermont is a rural area serviced by one tertiary academic medical center located in its only Metropolitan Statistical Area (Burlington-South Burlington), and thirteen community hospitals, eight of which are critical access hospitals. There are also fifteen Rural Health Clinics in Vermont and five Federally Qualified Health Centers providing services at thirty nine sites in the state. As a result of its small geographic size (9,250 square miles), Vermont is not one of the twenty states with the lowest population density eligible for the Rural Community Hospital Demonstration under the Affordable Care Act. However, with a 2010 estimated population of 625,741 people, including 414,480 people living in rural Vermont (USDA-ERS), Vermont is a primarily rural state.

WHY THIS “GUIDANCE” SHOULD BE CHANGED

The primary question posed by the agencies to prospective ACO applicants in the Statement is: “[w]hether and, if so, why, the guidance in the proposed policy statement should be changed.” The simple answer is “yes;” in order for the Medicare ACO program to achieve its ambitious goal of helping to transform the way in which health care is paid for and delivered to benefit patients and communities, the antitrust agencies must make fundamental changes in their approach. In its current form, the Statement will serve as a significant and unnecessary barrier to participation in the Medicare ACO program and will not provide the guidance needed to spur adoption of and continued innovation in clinical integration beyond the Medicare program.

We urge your agencies to substantially revise the Statement, and instead provide for comment by all of those affected, user-friendly guidance on how the agencies will analyze, under the rule-of-reason, clinically integrated organizations, that are or are like Medicare ACOs, to avoid or minimize antitrust risk. Guidance should not be a prerequisite for participation in the Medicare ACO program, instead the agencies should continue to respond to concerns as they arise in the marketplace. The agencies should also provide for a streamlined process for clinically integrated organizations to receive more specific advice that works in sync with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services’ (CMS) application process.

THE STATEMENT LACKS MEANINGFUL GUIDANCE

One of the most useful features of the Statement was assurance that Medicare ACOs would be reviewed by the antitrust agencies under the rule-of-reason, which balances procompetitive potential against anticompetitive risk. Guidance from the agencies on how that analysis would be applied would assist hospitals and other providers in forming and operating such clinically integrated organizations.

The hospital field has long sought guidance from the antitrust agencies on clinical integration, similar to that in the Statements of Antitrust Enforcement in Health Care. It was the 1996 Statements that first broadened the concept of legitimate provider integration to include clinical integration. Since then, the agencies have repeatedly declined to provide guidance in a similar manner, despite repeated calls by members of Congress, the hospital field and others. The Medicare ACO program provides an opportunity for the antitrust agencies to issue such guidance focused on how the agencies will analyze ACOs, and similarly clinically integrated organizations, under the rule-of-reason.

THE PROPOSED FORMULAS SHOULD BE ABANDONED

The Statement proposes a new, untested and highly problematic formula to determine the shares of each prospective ACO participant in its “Primary Service Area” (PSA). Shares must be calculated for *each* common service to be provided by *each* participating hospital and doctor (or group of doctors) within *each* provider’s PSA. PSA is defined as the lowest number of contiguous zip codes from which the provider draws at least 75 percent of its patients. Among the serious concerns with this new formula are that it is untested, certain to be burdensome and costly, certain to pose great difficulties when non-Medicare services are to be included in the

ACO and could raise issues for hospitals that undertake the PSA analysis on behalf of physicians under the fraud and abuse laws if no waiver is provided:

- Calculating PSA shares on the basis of Medicare fee-for-service data is likely to be unreliable and will be practically unavailable for any service or medical specialty that does not routinely provide services to Medicare patients, such as obstetrics, pediatrics, burn units and HIV services, for example. The data will also overstate the shares of providers who care for large numbers of Medicare patients and understate the shares of those who restrict their practices to commercially-insured patients. Even where Medicare fee-for-service data might be available, it will be extremely difficult for physicians to pull zip code data and match it with billing records to obtain the services provided.
- Calculating PSA shares on the basis of contiguous zip codes likely will be burdensome and costly and require substantial judgment calls.
- The “Stark” law requires that compensation for health care providers be fixed in advance and paid only for hours worked. The Stark law could be implicated if a hospital compensates physicians by organizing and paying for the costly analysis required to determine physician PSA shares. There is no indication in the notice issued by CMS and the Office of Inspector General on waivers in connection with the Medicare ACO program or that a waiver for such activities and expenses is being considered.

MANDATORY REVIEW SHOULD NOT BE REQUIRED

Under the proposed Statement, any prospective Medicare ACO applicant that received a PSA score of 50 percent or above for any service or specialty is subject to *mandatory* review by one of the antitrust agencies. This is true, even if the score is for a non-Medicare service, such as pediatrics, and even if the ACO applicant’s PSA share is well below 50 percent for the vast majority of services provided.

Mandatory review is not confined to the specific service(s) over 50 percent, but will subject the entire Medicare ACO applicant to antitrust scrutiny. Practically, this means that a prospective applicant with even a single PSA above 50 percent would need to: (1) submit a large number of documents (that do not overlap with those required by other agencies); and (2) obtain a time-consuming and expensive antitrust analysis from an antitrust practitioner, to be prepared to defend its ACO application before one of the agencies.

This approach inappropriately delegates to the antitrust agencies the authority to determine which prospective ACO will be permitted to apply for the Medicare ACO program based on concerns about whether the ACO could impact price competition in the private sector. This concern seems particularly misplaced because the application at issue would be to participate in the Medicare ACO program, a program in which there is no price competition, as the terms, conditions and reimbursement provided are dictated solely by a federal agency.

The antitrust agencies could make a positive contribution by developing a truly streamlined process (90 days or less) that *allows* prospective ACO applicants to obtain antitrust guidance at the same time CMS is reviewing the application. Such a process would also aid other clinically integrated organizations.

THE RURAL EXCEPTION IS TOO NARROW

Given Vermont's primarily rural nature, prospective ACO applicants can be expected to receive PSA scores well above 50 percent for most services that the hospital provides and, therefore, be subject to mandatory antitrust review. It is not clear from the proposed Statement that the rural exception will provide meaningful relief from this mandatory review requirement in Vermont. Each hospital in Vermont varies in percentage of employed versus non-employed physicians on its medical staff. However, it is very unusual in Vermont for less than all of the physicians in a specialty practice group to be members of the medical staff at the local hospital. In this context, it is not clear from the proposed Statement how the exception for the inclusion in an ACO of rural hospitals and one physician per specialty from each rural county would be applied. If mandatory antitrust review requirements are not eliminated, having a larger share of providers where necessary should be allowed under the exception if the providers are nonexclusive (available to work with others) and more detail should be provided with respect to how the rural exception will be applied.

THE INDICIA OF "CLINICAL INTEGRATION" IS OVERLY PRESCRIPTIVE AND UNNECESSARY

The indicia of "clinical integration" included in the CMS rule and relied on by the antitrust agencies is overly prescriptive and unnecessary. This includes, for example, a "leadership and management structure" that anticipates a formal governing body where "ACO participants hold at least 75 percent control." The antitrust agencies should specify which criteria are related to antitrust issues and applicable to clinically integrated health care organizations.

We appreciate the work and collaboration among the agencies that went into the Statement; however, in its current form, it will itself be an unnecessary and unfortunate barrier to Medicare ACO formation and operation. We hope the antitrust agencies will take this opportunity to substitute for the Statement meaningful guidance and a streamlined and voluntary process to obtain advice from the agencies. We look forward to working with the agencies to make the Medicare ACO program a success and to lay a stronger foundation for other clinically integrated arrangements to flourish.

Sincerely,

M. Beatrice Grause, R.N., J.D.
President and Chief Executive Officer
Vermont Association of Hospitals and Health Systems