

# Participation in Quality Reporting Jumped in 2008

BY JOYCE FRIEDEN

Physicians and other health professionals participating in Medicare's Physician Quality Reporting Initiative received a total of \$92 million in incentive payments under the program in 2008, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services announced.

That figure is nearly three times the \$36 million paid out in 2007, the agency not-

ed. The number of medical professionals receiving payments also increased during the same period, from 57,000 to 85,000. The average payment in 2008 was more than \$1,000, with the largest single payment at \$98,000. During 2007, the reporting period lasted only 6 months for all participants, while in 2008 participants could report for a 6- or 12-month period.

"We are very pleased with the results for 2008," acting CMS administrator Charlene

Frizzera said in a statement. "More health professionals have successfully reported data, and the substantial growth in the national total for PQRI incentive payments demonstrates that Medicare can align payment with quality incentives."

Under Medicare's PQRI program, providers receive incentive payments for reporting data on quality measures. The incentive payments currently amount to 1.5% of each provider's to-

tal estimated allowed charges under Medicare Part B. Although more than 153,000 health professionals participated in the program during 2008, only 85,000 met the requirements for satisfactory reporting and therefore received incentive payments.

To make participation easier, the CMS expanded the number of measures providers could report on, from 74 in 2007 to 119 in 2008. ■

## Subsidies for COBRA Have Started to Expire

Millions of unemployed workers and their families are facing the prospect of becoming uninsured or paying four-figure monthly premiums to keep their health coverage as government-funded subsidies expire, according to a new report from Families USA.

Under the Recovery Act, passed earlier this year, the federal government has been subsidizing 65% of health insurance premiums under COBRA, the government program that allows unemployed workers to retain their employer-sponsored health coverage provided they pay both the worker and employer share of the premium.

The subsidy was available from 9 months from the day unemployed worker began COBRA coverage. People who obtained the subsidy when it first became available in March, had to begin paying the full cost for COBRA starting on Dec. 1. And starting in January 2010, the subsidy will no longer be available for newly unemployed workers.

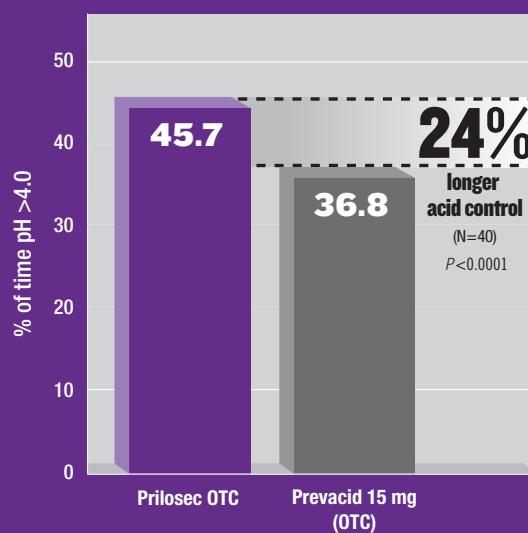
The loss of the subsidy effectively means that most of these families won't be able to afford keep their health coverage, according to Ron Pollack, executive director of Families USA, a consumer advocacy group that focuses on health care issues. For example, the average family premium for COBRA coverage is \$1,111 per month, up from about \$389 with the government subsidy. Many families with an unemployed worker can't afford that cost, Mr. Pollack said, since the average unemployment check is about \$1,333 a month. In nine states, the average cost of family coverage under COBRA actually exceeds the average unemployment check, according to the Families USA report.

At a news conference accompanying the release of the report, Mr. Pollack urged Congress to pass legislation that would extend the COBRA subsidies for an additional 6 months. He added that the health reform proposal being debated in the Senate now would solve the issue permanently by allowing unemployed workers to purchase insurance through a regulated insurance exchange that includes subsidies for low-income Americans.

—Mary Ellen Schneider

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