

Medicaid controversy

New sterilization rules irk doctors

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

New federal guidelines regarding Medicaid-financed sterilizations have area doctors fuming. Poor women who want or need sterilization may find it more difficult to obtain the operation.

The new guidelines were issued recently by the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) and took effect Feb. 6.

The guidelines say persons wanting to be sterilized must give written consent to the operation at least 30 days before it will be performed.

They specify that patients must be informed of other forms of birth control and sterilization.

And they provide that interpreters must be used to inform foreign language-speaking patients of all the ramifications of sterilization.

Doctors fear the increased paperwork, coupled with the possibility that the federal government will withhold payment for sterilization operations it deems unnecessary, will result in fewer doctors administering to Medicaid patients.

THE NEW guidelines provide, said Dr. Cornelius A. Navori, chief of Oakland Hospital's Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology in Dearborn, that Medicaid will not pay for a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus) if the operation was done in the interest of birth control.

Oakland ranked third in the state in the number of babies delivered last year.

Medicaid, at the same time, will con-

tinue to fund vasectomies for men who request them.

According to Dr. Navori, the question of hysterectomies is especially sensitive because doctors, patients and the federal government may interpret the need for the operation differently.

"SUPPOSE THERE'S a 28-year-old woman who has already had three children," Dr. Navori said. "She's been taking birth control pills, but is complaining of abdominal pains. It turns out that one, two or three fibroid tumors have developed in her uterus.

"She shouldn't be taking birth control pills because they contribute to the development of the tumors. But the easiest way to end the discomfort is to remove the uterus.

"Will the state authorities and HEW accept it as an operation to remove the pain? Or was it done for family planning purposes?" Dr. Navori asked rhetorically.

He said federal authorities have not indicated how they will interpret the guidelines regarding hysterectomies. Therefore, doctors will hesitate performing them, he said.

He added, however, that banning Medicaid-funded, non-therapeutic hysterectomies may be justified by higher "morbidity" rates among women who have had the operations.

WHILE THE uncertainty over hysterectomies has caused considerable concern among doctors, they are also worried about the guideline's provisions regarding "emergency" steriliza-

tion. Under the guidelines, the woman must give consent at least 72 hours before the operation. Doctors say that this provision could tie their hands in critical situations.

In some Caesarian section operations, a decision for a hysterectomy or tubal ligation is made by the woman either before or during the course of the operation, Dr. Navori said. The ideal time for such a sterilization operation, he said, is immediately following the Caesarian section.

Now, he said, because of the guidelines Medicaid patients will be denied

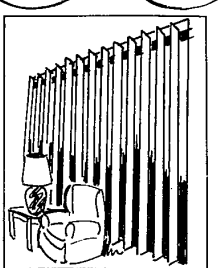
that option. "One way or another, the only one who's going to lose is the patient," Dr. Navori said.

APART FROM the guidelines' medical implications, the increase in paperwork may cause doctors to turn away Medicaid patients seeking sterilization. "There's no telling how many people will be denied sterilizations because of it," Dr. Navori said.

"A lot of doctors will not want to put up with the bureaucratic paper pushing," he said. "A lot of doctors will ask, 'Do I need this?'"

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Help available on utility bills

The Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency received \$106,000 from the federal government to help low-income families pay last year's utility bills.

"If many people have already paid these bills, we can help them with bills for this year if they can show such a hardship occurs," said Ron Marabate, project operations director for the Oakland Livingston Service Agency.

Marabate estimated that the federal funds will help 450 families. The money must be expended by March 15, and

families receiving the aid do not have to repay it.

According to Marabate, acceptable income levels are:

\$7,750 for a non-farm family of four whose head is less than 60 years old.

\$9,200 for a non-farm family of four whose head is at least 60 years old.

\$6,240 for a couple over 60 years old.

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