Aetna gives PET payment go-ahead

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Aetna Health Plans has joined the growing list of private insurance companies that have authorized reimbursement of positron emission tomography scans. Aetna began covering PET scans early this year after the company's technology review board last winter recommended use of the modality for three applications, according to William McGivney, head of technology assessment for the insurer.

Blue Cross/Blue Shield (BC/BS) issued a similar endorsement of PET in July (SCAN 8/12/92). PET supporters hope that private third-party reimbursement will snowball as a federal decision approaches on Medicare reimbursement for PET. Aetna's authorization includes two neurological applications recommended by BC/BS, but it also covers cardiac PET, which was not recommended by BC/BS. This will help overcome the perception that cardiac PET is still an experimental procedure, according to Michael McGehee of the Institute for Clinical PET in Washington, DC.

"The importance to us is the cardiac component of it," McGehee said. "That firmly establishes that a national firm is going to be paying for cardiac scans. That's a significant perceptual point."

Aetna reimburses PET as follows:

- for presurgical evaluation of patients with temporal lobe seizures that are not controlled by epilepsy medication;
- for evaluation of primary brain tumors, to provide prognostic information, to identify the appropriate site for biopsy and to distinguish recurrent tumor from necrosis after radiation or chemotherapy; and
- for presurgery evaluation to determine myocardial viability in patients being considered for coronary revascularization.

Aetna's decision is also important because it applies to all health plan policyholders. The national BC/BS endorsement was not binding on individual BC/BS affiliates, although most affiliates abide by the national office's recommendations.

McGehee expects the Health Care Financing Administration to make a decision on Medicare PET reimbursement toward the middle of next year. If PET gets the green light, a decision on reimbursement rates will also be made at that time. The ICP has been gathering information on scan charges at PET sites across the country and will present the data to HCFA to help the agency draw up a reimbursement schedule, McGehee said.

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