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New Legislation Focuses on Helping Patients

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Pending legislation in the House and Senate would make life a little easier for patients who are Medicare beneficiaries, including cheaper drug prices and standards for survivorship care.

In addition to the several private plans offered by Medicare Part D, the Medicare Prescription Drug Savings and Choice Act of 2009 would allow the Secretary of Health and Human Services to negotiate drug prices with pharmaceutical companies. Medicare recipients would have the option to choose a Part D private plan or one managed by the federal government under the original Medicare program.

The bill was introduced during the past three sessions of Congress with no results, but proponents of the bill say the additional option could provide patients with a plan that may not be as confusing or expensive as a private plan.

A second piece of legislation could help patients once they complete treatment. Cancer survivors continue to struggle with access to information about their treatment, and are often discharged from cancer care with little idea about what medical follow-up is recommended for them.

“Unfortunately, when you’re discharged, you’re pretty much on your own,” says Dick Woodruff of the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network. To address this issue, advocates are pressing for passage of the Comprehensive Cancer Care Improvement Act, a bill that would, among other things, amend Medicare regulations to allow doctors to be reimbursed for creating a survivorship plan for their cancer patients. The plan would include a summary outlining surgeries, radiation, and drugs—including specific dosages—and provide a plan for ongoing care, including screening tests, follow-up visits, potential long-term side effects, and health monitoring.

The bill was introduced in the Senate last April and had more than 100 co-sponsors in the House of Representatives, but was never put up for a vote.

Rep. Lois Capps (D-California), who introduced the bill in 2006 and 2007, is expected to introduce the bill again this year.

The Comprehensive Cancer Care Improvement Act is a top priority for the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship, says Susan Silver, director of communications and programs for the coalition. “One of the ways to change cancer care is to reform the payment system,” Silver says.

More than 30 health care groups support the bill, including the American Society of Clinical Oncology and many of the National Cancer Institute’s designated cancer centers, she says. The NCCS has 30,000 volunteers actively advocating the bill through its e-mail program (enter search phrase “comprehensive cancer care” at www.canceradvocacy.org).