The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) is adding a new benefit for Medicare Part B beneficiaries, the initial preventive physical examination (IPPE) or more commonly known as the “Welcome to Medicare” exam. This benefit will be available to individuals who enroll in Medicare for Part B Coverage on or after January 1, 2005. This benefit is available only during their first six months following enrollment.

The “Welcome to Medicare” exam must include screening tests for hearing loss and balance disorders to review the beneficiary’s functional ability and level of safety. The seven components of the preventive exam include:

- A review of the beneficiary’s medical and social history;
- A review of the beneficiary’s potential for depression;
- A review of the beneficiary’s functional ability and level of safety, including screening for hearing impairment and falls risk;
- An examination including measurement of height, weight, blood pressure, visual acuity, and other factors;
- An electrocardiogram;
- Education, counseling, and referral, as deemed appropriate, based on the results of preceding services; and
- Education, counseling, and referral, including a brief written plan, regarding appropriate screening and preventive services separately covered by Medicare (e.g., bone density test).

Of course, certain rules must be applied in the “Welcome to Medicare” Examination:

The examination may be provided only by a physician or “qualified non-physician practitioner” (i.e., a physician assistant, nurse practitioner, or clinical nurse specialist). The “Welcome to Medicare” examination may not be furnished by an audiologist. CMS has instructed that hearing and balance screening tests are to be in the form of questions or questionnaires, not audiometric testing. The questionnaires used must be recognized by a national medical professional organization. If the questions or questionnaire identify a hearing impairment or indicate a risk of falling for the patient. CMS acknowledges that additional services including counseling and referral may be warranted. The “Welcome to Medicare” examination, which must include all seven items, (coded as G0344, and G0366 for the EKG) will result in a reimbursement of $124.30 to the examination physician.

Physician specialty societies have currently voiced several concerns; one, about the low reimbursement rate for an examination that includes several service elements, and two, the difficulty in scheduling patients for the preventive exam in the first 6 months of enrollment as well as verifying eligibility for the preventive exam.

**Opportunity for Audiologists**

CMS invites the health care community to educate physicians, qualified non-physician practitioners, and Medicare beneficiaries about the new IPPE benefit. This is a unique opportunity and a key time for audiologists to educate the medical and/or physician community about the services we provide. Audiologists should be the primary referral source in the follow-up appointments to further evaluate the patients who fail hearing and balance screenings. This is a great “lunch and learn” or “office-drop-by” opportunity to visit your referral offices or develop new referral sources.

If you have questions or need more information about the new “Welcome to Medicare” program and benefits, call the Academy’s office of Health Care Policy at 800-AAA-2336, ext. 1032.

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**Be part of the “Welcome to Medicare” Program process:**

- Create a list of primary care physicians in your area
- Prepare a packet of information to present to each physician in your community including:
  - The “Welcome to Medicare” fact sheet (www.audiology.org/professional/members/medicare)
  - A copy of suggested screening questionnaires
    For Hearing Screening: HHIE-S
    For Falls Risk and Balance: DHI-S
  - Academy brochures explaining audiology and balance services
  - Additional information about your practice and the services that you provide
- Organize your schedule to visit each physician’s office in your area
- Explain the new Welcome to Medicare exam to the physicians and how to interpret the screening results of the hearing and balance questionnaires