



September 2014

SeniorSource

A Newsletter from

U.S. Senator Susan Collins

Ranking Member,

Senate Special Committee on Aging

SENATE AGING COMMITTEE EXAMINES RISE OF HOSPITAL OBSERVATION STAYS, FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR SENIORS

Bob Armstrong of St. Mary's Health System in Lewiston Appears Before Senate Panel

The U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, led by Chairman Bill Nelson and Ranking Member Susan Collins, held a hearing recently to examine the increasing use of hospital observation stays for Medicare patients. The hearing was held amid growing criticism from some Medicare patients who say observation stays have cost them thousands of dollars more in out-of-pocket costs.

Bob Armstrong, Vice President of Elder Care Services at St. Mary's Health System in Lewiston, was among the witnesses who testified.

Currently, when a Medicare beneficiary enters the hospital, a physician must decide whether to admit him or her as an inpatient or under "observation status." Observation care is intended for patients who are not well enough to go home but may not be sick enough to be admitted officially.

The distinction between observation status and inpatient status often carries significant financial consequences for Medicare beneficiaries. Senator Collins explained that the increase in hospital observation stays has been detrimental to many seniors because patients are held responsible for outpatient copayments and prescription drug costs that they would not have had as an inpatient. There is no out-of-pocket cap on these costs.



Senator Collins greets Lewiston's Bob Armstrong following a recent Aging Committee hearing.

Equally important, Medicare will not cover the cost of a subsequent rehabilitation facility or nursing home stay for observation status patients because the program requires beneficiaries to stay three full days as a hospital inpatient in order to receive such coverage.

Senator Collins described the case of a Portland woman whose mother-in-law went to the emergency room complaining of chest pain. The woman was admitted to the hospital on observation status, where she remained for five days. During her stay, she developed additional health conditions and was discharged to a nursing facility, where she stayed for nearly a month for follow-up care. The woman and her family were stunned when they learned that she would have to pay more than \$9,000 because Medicare would not cover the skilled nursing care. This was a huge financial burden for the family.

Bob Armstrong, who works with the d'Youville Pavilion, which is part of the St. Mary's Health System, discussed the many problems patients are facing as a result of the increasing number of observation stays. He said he supports the "Improving Access to Medicare Act," which is cosponsored by Senator Collins and will enable hospital observation stays to count toward

the three-night hospital stay that is required for Medicare to cover care at a skilled nursing facility.

In addition to Mr. Armstrong, other witnesses included a hospital administrator and hospital physician who have seen first-hand the problems seniors can face as a result of increased hospital observation stays.

Medicare originally intended hospital observation stays as a way to give hospital doctors more time to evaluate and determine whether a patient should be admitted to the hospital; however:

- The number of seniors entering the hospital for observation has increased by 69% over five years, to 1.6 million.
- This increase can result in severe financial consequences for many seniors.

SEN. COLLINS PRESSES FOR INCREASED FUNDING FOR ALZHEIMER'S RESEARCH

With Senator Collins' support, a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee approved a \$100 million increase in funding for Alzheimer's research at the National Institute on Aging. This funding builds upon a \$100 million increase that the Senator helped secure in the FY 2014 omnibus federal spending bill.

Senator Collins said, "I am particularly pleased that this spending bill significantly increases our commitment to Alzheimer's disease research. While it is critical that we do more, this is a major step forward in our battle against this disease, which takes a devastating toll on our nation in both human and economic terms."

It is estimated that nearly one in two baby boomers reaching the age of 85 will develop Alzheimer's or be caring for a loved one with the disease.

Supporting research efforts that will lead to better diagnosis, treatment, and ultimately a cure for Alzheimer's disease is among Senator Collins' highest priorities in the United States Senate. For her efforts, Senator Collins is slated to be honored with the "Out of the Shadows" award from WomenAgainstAlzheimer's later this fall.

SENS. COLLINS AND SHAHEEN INTRODUCE BILL TO ENSURE MEDICARE COVERAGE FOR CONTINUOUS GLUCOSE MONITORS

In an effort to help millions of Americans who are living with Type 1 diabetes and who rely on a continuous glucose monitor (CGMs) to successfully manage the disease, Senators Susan Collins and Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), co-chairs of the Senate Diabetes Caucus, have introduced legislation that requires Medicare to cover the cost of these devices.



Currently, insulin-dependent Medicare beneficiaries are being denied coverage for CGMs because the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services has determined that these devices do not meet the Medicare definition of "durable medical equipment" and do not fall under any other Medicare category. As a result, people with Type I diabetes who have had private insurance coverage for their CGMs lose that coverage when they age into Medicare.

JDRF, a leading diabetes advocacy organization, praised the Senators, saying that seniors with Type I diabetes urgently need Medicare to make these life-saving technologies available.

Preventing Falls



In 2012, more than 2.4 million older adults were treated in emergency departments for falls; more than 722,000, or 30%, of these patients had to be hospitalized

Source: National Council on Aging, Falls Free Initiative

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that the death rate from falls among older adults has risen sharply over the past decade. That is why Senator Collins has supported efforts to increase awareness about the dangers of elder falls.

The CDC has available a checklist for things that older individuals, in particular, can do to help prevent falls, including:

⇒ Exercise regularly. Exercise increases strength, balance, and coordination.

- ⇒ Get up slowly after you lie or sit down.
- ⇒ Have your doctor or pharmacist look at all the medications you take, even over-the-counter medicines. Some medicines can make you sleepy or dizzy.
- ⇒ Have your vision checked at least once a year by an eye doctor. Poor vision can increase your risk of falling.
- ⇒ Wear shoes both inside and outside the home. Avoid going barefoot or wearing slippers.
- ⇒ Improve the lighting in your home.
- ⇒ It is safest to have uniform lighting in a room. Add lighting to see dark areas. Hang lightweight curtains or shades to reduce glare.
- ⇒ Paint a contrasting color on the top edge of all steps so you can see better.

A more complete checklist to help prevent falls can be found on the CDC website: www.cdc.gov/HomeandRecreationalSafety/Falls/CheckListForSafety.html

**Senator Collins Wants to
Hear from You!**

Senator Collins always appreciates hearing from Mainers. If you are having difficulty with a federal agency or if you wish to share your views or concerns, please contact Senator Collins' office or one of her Maine Constituent Service Centers.



*Email messages can be sent to the Senator through her website:
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