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Medicare slide in M-C

BURLEY — Some Mini-Cassia seniors may have a harder time finding a physician as more doctors continue to opt out of Medicare or limit the number of Medicare patients they accept.

“I have had a lot of seniors tell me that their doctors are just not going to do it anymore or that they are not taking new patients,” said Sharon Hardy-Mills, director of Golden Heritage Senior Center in Burley. “And you can’t blame the doctors.”

The decline continues existing trends, not just in Mini-Cassia but nationwide. Physicians are only paid a certain percentage of their cost for care of Medicare enrollees — currently about 40 percent, Hardy-Mills said. Congress has repeatedly delayed further planned cuts.

The current rate and threat of further cuts have left doctors pulling away from Medicare in order to reduce their risks. “There is an issue all the way around with a growing number of doctors not taking new (Medicare) patients,” said Nora Wells, volunteer coordinator for the Senior Health Insurance Benefit Advisors program run by the Idaho Department of Insurance.

“We have received numerous calls from patients who have been notified by their doctors that they were opting out of Medicare,” Eddie Lopez, with Cassia Family Practice in Burley, said in a written release. “Because we are both a Family Medical Practice and a WorkMed Clinic, we can usually accommodate these patients but there are some serious long-term concerns for the medical system locally and across the nation.”

Cassia Family Practice is affiliated with Intermountain Healthcare’s Cassia Regional Medical Center. Hospital spokeswoman Stephanie Curtis said there are no issues with the hospital accepting Medicare patients at this time.

Wells, who counsels seniors on Medicare benefits throughout the eight counties in south-central Idaho, said many Medicare patients encounter issues when they choose a Medicare Advantage Plan without carefully researching whether their provider is considered “preferred. People need to be proactive when they choose that route,” Wells said. “It’s paramount.”

Lopez said in the release that Cassia Family Practice remains optimistic about being able to serve new Medicare patients. The clinic has been able to accommodate transfers to the clinic with few glitches despite cumbersome Medicare requirements, according to the release. “We feel we can continue to consider other Medicare patients for an indefinite period of time,” Lopez stated.

Hardy-Mills said she fears the declining number of doctors willing to take Medicare patients will drive seniors to the night clinics or the emergency rooms, or they just won’t go at all. “The ER is the most expensive medical care you can receive,” she said. Chris and Mike Priest, who are new to the Medicare system, said they are taking it day-by-day and anxiously await news of any changes to their coverage. “We usually go over to the Evening Clinic in Burley and it’s usually packed,” said Chris Priest. “Medicare seems to pay better on that than if we found a physician who took Medicare.”