



HME during COVID-19: Building Trust and Promoting Value


It's an unprecedented time in our nation's history as we are dealing with this COVID-19 pandemic. While it is tough to see the silver lining of this cloud, one thing that stands out to me is the opportunity for the home medical equipment (HME) community to shine and show the world, especially CMS, the value it brings to the healthcare continuum of care. Allowing sick patients to heal and rehabilitate while at home has always been a core function of HME, but perhaps it was never appreciated or recognized as such by the legislators and policy-makers as it should have been. Never before in our history have we been faced with such enormous challenges with overflowing hospitals needing to discharge patients as quickly as possible in an effort to make room for other more sickly ones. The HME industry is uniquely poised to manage the challenge. With that challenge also comes a responsibility as suppliers seeking funds from the government for reimbursement to be diligent and practical when submitting claims, understanding that they may be scrutinized later down the road.

CMS recently removed Local and National Coverage Determination requirements for oxygen and other respiratory equipment such as PAP, RAD and ventilators, in addition to infusion products. By doing this, it opens up the ability to bill and receive payment for these products in instances that would not have warranted coverage before. It will allow acute patients in the hospital with pneumonia to be discharged home with oxygen on a temporary basis in order to free up the much-needed hospital bed. It will allow for the application of an oxygen concentrator or a ventilator for COVID-19 patients. The possibilities are endless when you consider having no restrictions.

Having no restrictions though also comes with the potential for abuse. Unfortunately, the HME industry has been prone to having a few bad apples spoiling the bunch. CMS has also opened up the enrollment process to allow for entities to enroll and receive temporary billing privileges without being accredited while waiving application fees and background checks, which certainly makes Medicare and our industry vulnerable to unscrupulous outsiders taking advantage of the situation.

We must remain vigilant. We are being given an enormous opportunity by CMS at this moment. An opportunity to shine, provide tremendous value, and help save lives during this pandemic, which could forever change the image of our industry with policy-makers for the future.

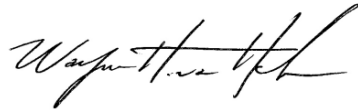
During this time, I think it is important to remember the intent of these relaxed restrictions, which is to enable patients to have access to life-saving medical equipment in order to treat certain conditions and free up space in hospitals. Once this public health emergency (PHE) declaration is lifted, these policies will be reinstated. The audits will return, and claims submitted during this time could be scrutinized later down the road. It is likely that CMS will require that patients who received equipment during the PHE will have to be requalified. It is up to us to track, monitor, and control what we do during this time, not only for the good of the industry, but also because



of our shared responsibility in protecting the Medicare Trust Fund. For example, oxygen equipment or ventilators provided to acute patients will need to be picked up once they are no longer using it, instead of leaving it with the patient and continuing to bill. It is important that we do not take advantage of the situation and instead act intentionally and in the best interest of our patients, the government, and the public.

It is important for an industry to police itself. That is why VGM is reminding everyone that if you are aware of individuals or entities that are committing fraud or abuse, you can alert the [Fraud Eradication Advisory Team \(FEAT\)](#) who will provide information to the appropriate authorities. The HME industry provides value beyond measure to its patients. Historically, it's usually only been those of us who work in the industry or rely on HME that have recognized it. We can change that now. Let's do so consciously and responsibly and do our part to save lives and show the world what we're worth.

With greatest respect,



Wayne H. van Halem

President, The van Halem Group, a subsidiary of VGM & Associates