

Oz Wants MA To Incentivize Lifestyle, Nutrition Changes To Fight Obesity

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CMS administrator nominee Mehmet Oz wants Medicare Advantage to incentivize “wiser moves” for patients to help prevent chronic disease, and said lifestyle choices can help those with obesity. His remarks come as the White House considers whether to finalize a Biden-era proposal for CMS to cover anti-obesity medications to treat chronic disease.

Oz said at his Friday (March 14) Senate Finance Committee confirmation hearing that “medications are, at times, useful but sometimes not, for problems like heart disease and even Alzheimer’s (disease).” But he didn’t mention the role of weight-loss drugs during the hearing.

Oz said in his opening statement that chronic disease is raising the cost of health care in the United States, with a major driver being lifestyle choices. Finance chair Mike Crapo (R-ID) asked Oz to expand on his vision for CMS and how he would integrate nutrition and lifestyle-based interventions into the health care system.

“If we gave people in their hands tools, resources that are useful, not information, but tactics and support teams that could work with them to improve their well-being, many would take advantage of it,” Oz said.

Oz pointed out that 43% of the American population is obese and said part of the reason people don’t lose weight is due to the lack of support.

“They don’t have lifestyle advice that they can implement into their life, day in and day out. For anyone in this committee who was able to go running or exercising for 20 minutes yesterday, you probably did the equivalent of reducing \$100 billion of expenses for Medicare, Medicaid just by being active,” he said.

Sen. Todd Young (R-IN) asked Oz what CMS reforms he thinks should be made to help prevent chronic disease. Oz said Medicare Advantage beneficiaries have access to a food allowance but do not have access to advice on how to use that money wisely. He suggested CMS could work with private businesses, such as supermarkets, to provide better support with that money.

“Maybe supermarkets can provide better food support with that money, if that’s what the beneficiary decides,” Oz said. “We don’t have to order people to eat healthy, we have to make it easier for them to be healthy. Even exercising a few minutes a day will have a massive impact.”

He also said some research has shown that lifestyle changes, like more exercise and better nutrition, can reverse conditions like heart disease.

The comments come as CMS is poised to make a decision on the coverage of obesity medications. At play is a proposed CMS rule from the Biden administration that reinterprets statute to allow coverage of anti-obesity medications (AOMs) for those with obesity, considering it a chronic disease treatment under Medicare and Medicaid.

Meanwhile, Sen. Bill Cassidy's (R-LA) office is in discussions with the Trump administration to finalize coverage of AOMs. Legislative movement on the Treat and Reduce Obesity Act (TROA), which would lift a statutory prohibition on CMS coverage of weight-loss medication, is paused until the decision is made, but the chances of the introduced version of TROA passing without the CMS rule proceeding remains slim.

Despite the Congressional Budget Office scoring a policy that allows Medicare to cover AOMs as more costly than the associated savings, the report still comes as good news to obesity coverage advocates who say it shows treating obesity would lead to other health care savings and not bankrupt Medicare as some have suggested. They also note CBO scored a much broader policy than the scaled-back legislation in play.

Chronic disease has been a hot topic in the Trump administration. HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is chairing a new body to combat childhood chronic disease, setting an ambitious agenda to improve Americans' health. Kennedy has said the office will focus on topics like food additives and the "risks" of medications, including psychiatric and weight-loss drugs.

Earlier this month, the House passed the Chronic Disease Flexible Coverage Act, bringing Congress one step closer to codifying 2019 Internal Revenue Service guidance that allows high-deductible health plans with connected health savings accounts the option of covering the costs of 14 medications and other chronic care management services used to treat certain conditions before a plan enrollee's deductible is reached, with the door open for the list of applicable services to expand over the years. -- *Luke Zarzecki* (lzarzecki@iwppnews.com)