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**HHS EXTENDS DEADLINE TO ALLOW COVERED ENTITIES
TO TEST ABC CODES IN HIPAA TRANSACTIONS**

ALBUQUERQUE, NM. April 16, 2003. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has extended the registration deadline for voluntary use and evaluation of ABC codes across healthcare settings, under a new two-year HIPAA demonstration program. Covered entities (i.e., those that transmit electronic transactions mandated by HIPAA) should volunteer for this program by midnight, Thursday, May 29, 2003, if they wish to use ABC codes in HIPAA transactions after the October 16, 2003 compliance date. Those that register for free at www.alternativelink.com before May 29, 2003, will be able to use ABC codes in qualified electronic data interchange (EDI) transactions and claims processing systems beyond the compliance date.

Nearly ten thousand health industry participants have already volunteered for this program. Some of these plan to implement the code set in areas other than just electronic commerce, such as research, management and more traditional commerce applications. Current ABC code users and registrants include Medicare Plus Choice plans, Medicaid programs, commercial health plans, clearinghouses, administrative service organizations, information technology developers, provider organizations, practitioners and researchers. The code set has been used successfully in several showcase projects and is already embedded in the leading software application for automotive injury and medical claims adjudication in the property and casualty (P&C) insurance industry.

HHS extended an earlier registration deadline to ensure representative cost-benefit data could be collected on commercial use of ABC codes in HIPAA transactions. HIPAA—an acronym for the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996—required HHS to adopt national standards for electronic commerce to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the U.S. healthcare system. These standards were to help health plans, clearinghouses, provider organizations, healthcare practitioners and other trading partners conduct certain business processes electronically. Some of these transactions are used for eligibility determinations, health plan enrollments and disenrollments, payments of premiums, coordination of benefits, processing of claims or equivalent encounter information, payment and remittance advice, and claim status checks.

ABC codes were designed not only to meet HIPAA “administrative simplification” requirements and support these electronic transactions, but also to improve research, management and commerce for the kind of integrative healthcare today’s consumers demand. The codes characterize alternative medicine, nursing and other integrative healthcare practices and thereby fill gaps in older code sets administered by the American Medical Association (AMA) and the federal government’s Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).



The Current Procedural Terminology (CPT or HCPCS Level I codes) and Healthcare Common Procedure Coding System (HCPCS Level II codes) focus on conventional medical services and supplies delivered by allopathic physicians. They primarily reflect disease-based models of care. ABC codes focus on services and supplies delivered by other categories of healthcare practitioners. They primarily reflect wellness-based models of care and alternative medicine, nursing and other integrative healthcare practices.

ABC codes fit into the same data fields, software applications, information systems and business processes as the CPT and HCPCS Level II codes. The demonstration program will evaluate whether, used in conjunction with these code sets named in the HIPAA regulations, ABC codes provide added benefits in HIPAA transactions.

ABC codes are developed and maintained by The Foundation for Integrative Healthcare (FIHC), a non-profit organization, and Alternative Link (The Link), a privately-held New Mexico company.

FIHC (www.fihc.org) manages information on the characteristics and outcomes of care to help health industry organizations and practitioners make rational decisions that improve individual health, industry efficiencies and socioeconomic development.

The Link (www.alternativelink.com) delivers information products and consulting services that help health industry organizations and practitioners improve individual health, industry efficiencies and socioeconomic development.

Those wanting to participate in the demonstration program can register at www.alternativelink.com. This secure web site is being enhanced to help build official “handshakes” among those who plan to conduct HIPAA transactions using ABC codes. HHS uses the term “handshakes” to describe government-to-business (G2B), business-to-business (B2B), business-to-practitioner (B2P) and practitioner-to-practitioner (P2P) e-commerce relationships. The web site enhancements will help FIHC and The Link make registrant-authorized introductions that help potential G2B, B2B, B2P and P2P partners establish mutually rewarding handshakes around ABC codes.

An explanation of the official status of ABC codes can be obtained at 410.786.4160 (Eastern Time) through the CMS Office of HIPAA Standards. Transcripts and downloads from the National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics’ review of ABC codes are available at www.ncvhs.hhs.gov for the April 10-11th, May 29-30th, September 25-26th and December 10-11th hearings of 2002, as well as the January 29-30th and March 25-26th hearings of 2003.

ABC coding experts can be reached by emailing userregistration@alternativelink.com.

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