

MARCH 2021

# Advocacy Monthly



What topics would you like to read about in the next edition of *Advocacy Monthly*? The Society would like your feedback and suggestions in order to provide you with the most relevant resources and information. Please send your feedback to [communications@sts.org](mailto:communications@sts.org).

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## Senate Extends Moratorium on Medicare Cuts

Last week, the US Senate passed legislation that delays implementation of a mandated 2% cut in Medicare reimbursement that was set to go into effect today. Congress initially halted this cut in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act through the end of 2020 and later extended the moratorium to March 31. This latest bill provides a 9-month extension on the 2% sequester moratorium (until December 31). The House will take up the Senate-passed bill in mid-April when it returns to Washington DC; it is expected that the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) will hold Medicare claims until the bill is signed into law. Additional threats to cardiothoracic surgery reimbursement are still on the horizon, and STS members are encouraged to [get involved](#).

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## CMS Urged to Reopen NCD for Lung Cancer Screening

Following the US Preventive Services Task Force announcement expanding the inclusion criteria for lung cancer screening, STS joined forces with the American College of Radiology (ACR) and the GO2 Foundation for Lung Cancer in urging Medicare coverage for this larger population. In a [joint letter to CMS](#), the agency was asked to reopen its National Coverage Determination (NCD) for low-dose computed tomography lung cancer screening, update its screening risk criteria, and remove barriers to patient care. In addition, STS, ACR, and GO2 issued a [news release](#) about the expanded criteria and the importance of these lifesaving exams. More

information on CMS's response will be available in upcoming STS communications.

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## Society Stands Strong in War against Tobacco

STS recently signed onto three Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids letters in support of various anti-tobacco efforts.

- In a [letter to House and Senate appropriators](#), \$72.5 million in increased funding (for a total of \$310 million) was requested for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Office on Smoking and Health. This increase is vitally important to fund efforts that would help stop the alarming number of young people using e-cigarettes and ease the devastating toll that tobacco is taking on the nation's health during COVID-19, especially in minority and low-income communities.
- More than 50 medical organizations sent a [letter to Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester](#) (D-Del.) in strong support of the [Quit Because of COVID-19 Act](#). This legislation—which was spearheaded by Rep. Blunt Rochester—would ensure that all Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program enrollees have access to a full array of evidence-based tobacco cessation treatments for the duration of the COVID-19 public health crisis and the subsequent 2 years.
- In a [letter to the US Food and Drug Administration](#), several organizations urged prompt action by the agency to prohibit menthol cigarettes and other non-tobacco flavored tobacco products, including e-cigarettes and cigars.

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## MIPS Value Pathways Need More 'Episodic' Cost Measures

In December 2020, CMS finalized numerous changes and updates to the Merit-based Incentive Payment System (MIPS), including postponing the transition to MIPS Value Pathways (MVPs). Instead of requiring clinicians to report on many measures across multiple performance categories (quality, cost, promoting interoperability, and improvement activities), MVPs provide a system in which clinicians would report fewer measures. The Society joined the American Medical Association and other organizations in [supporting this delay](#) while CMS identifies opportunities to improve the program. The group offered recommendations such as changing from an "individualistic method" of reporting to a more episodic or condition-focused approach "with a clear end goal of improving patient outcomes."

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## STS Recognizes Key Contact of the Year

During the recent virtual STS-PAC Speaker Series event, Dr. Aaron Eckhauser, from the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, was presented with the STS Key Contact of the Year Award in recognition of his extraordinary efforts advocating for the specialty. Dr. Eckhauser explained that he became involved in STS advocacy after receiving the STS/ACS Health Policy Scholarship and attending the [Brandeis University Leadership Program for Health Policy and Management](#). “As a result of that experience, I was offered the opportunity to become involved in STS advocacy, and I’ve spent 6 years contributing and learning. I was so focused on the daily grind of surgery that I was completely unaware of all of the important topics affecting our field. Knowledge really is power,” he said. Sign up to become a [Key Contact](#).



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### Advocacy Extras

- The Society is a signatory on letters recently sent to Congress and government agencies urging action on [residency training](#), [loan repayment](#), and funding research for [gun violence prevention](#) and [climate change](#)—both of which impact cardiothoracic patients.

- The “E/M Coding in 2021: Changes in Documentation and Code Selection” webinar from last week now is available on the [STS YouTube channel](#) and as a [podcast episode](#). An expert panel provided an overview of 2021 evaluation and management (E/M) codes and explained how documentation and code-level selection have been impacted. The webinar featured scenarios and case examples, plus an audience Q&A.
- A new report in *The Annals of Thoracic Surgery* outlines the Society’s comprehensive advocacy efforts that helped successfully delay the Medicare reimbursement cuts, which would have put the specialty and its patients at risk. The report by Dr. Alan Speir and colleagues, “[STS Advocacy Concerning CMS Reduction in the 2021 Medicare Physician Fee Schedule to Cardiac and Thoracic Surgeons](#),” summarizes the campaign and highlights the importance of continued support from STS members.
- The STS-PAC Board of Advisors has passed a motion to direct campaign contributions in 2021 to lawmakers who did not object to the certification of any state’s electors on January 6, 2021. Surgeon leaders on the STS-PAC Board spent many hours discussing this controversial topic with strong opinions voiced on this issue. The PAC Board regularly reviews campaign contributions so that they are disbursed strategically to lawmakers who advance issues important to cardiothoracic surgeons and their patients. That process will continue.



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