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CMS Considers Expanded Reimbursement for Lung Cancer Screening

Following a request from STS, the GO2 Foundation for Lung Cancer, and the American College of Radiology, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has reopened its National Coverage Determination for low-dose computed tomography lung cancer screening. After the US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) expanded the exclusion criteria for lung cancer screening in early March, the health care community has been urging CMS to update lung cancer screening payment parameters to match the USPSTF guidance. CMS is soliciting comments through June 17; comments can be submitted on the [agency's website](#).

Physicians Held Harmless from Unfair Evaluations in MIPS Cost Category

Due to the impact of COVID-19, CMS will reweight the cost performance category for the Merit-Based Incentive Payment System (MIPS) from 15% to 0% for the 2020 performance period, which affects 2022 payments. The agency will redistribute the 15% to other performance categories. STS members do not need to take any action. CMS also agreed to a recent request from the Society and other specialty organizations to release previous MIPS cost measure benchmarks. This information has not been published previously, and its release will increase transparency in how the agency evaluates physician performance. In addition, the metrics are expected to help physicians and other stakeholders assess whether the measures are valid and identify opportunities to reduce spending.

FDA Commits to Ban on Menthol Cigarettes and Flavored Cigars

In what has been called a historic, life-saving move, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced that it intends to ban all menthol cigarettes and flavored cigars. Menthol is a flavor believed to have played a significant role in hooking young people on smoking. The FDA first promised a menthol ban in 2018, but backed off amid pushback from the tobacco industry. It's not clear when the ban will go into effect, but a recent [FDA press release](#) stated that the agency will work toward developing a regulation banning these products "within the next year." Tobacco companies are expected to challenge the decision in court. The

Society has a long-standing commitment to anti-tobacco efforts; more details are available at sts.org/tobaccopaper.

Proposal Could Fund More Physician Residency Slots

A long list of health care associations—including STS—that compose the Graduate Medical Education (GME) Advocacy Coalition sent a [letter to President Biden and Congressional leaders](#) in support of the [Resident Physician Shortage Reduction Act of 2021](#). At the end of last year, 1,000 Medicare-supported GME positions were authorized via a massive COVID-19 relief bill. This new legislation would phase in 14,000 additional residency slots (2,000 positions each year from 2023 to 2029).

New Bill Invests in Critical Research for Valvular Heart Disease

In a [letter to House and Senate leaders](#), the Society expressed its support for the [Cardiovascular Advances in Research and Opportunities Legacy \(CAROL\) Act](#). This legislation—which recently was introduced in the House—would authorize important funding for valvular heart disease (VHD) research and education. The CAROL Act also would encourage the use of imaging and precision medicine to generate data on people with VHD, as well as create public awareness programs on VHD symptoms and strategies for preventing sudden cardiac death. In addition, the letter underscored the value of the STS Adult Cardiac Surgery Database, stating that this important research tool could help provide insight into long-term quality and cost efficiency.

Specialty Societies Request Support for Health Care Infrastructure

The Society and more than 60 medical organizations are requesting an additional \$3 billion for the Medicare Physician Fee Schedule to mitigate expected reductions to the Medicare conversion factor. In a [letter to Congressional leaders](#), the group said that this “critical investment” would ensure financial stability for physicians and practices in 2022. With this level of funding, health care providers would be able to focus on addressing patient backlogs and identifying effective treatments for patients impacted by long-haul COVID-19 symptoms.

Advocacy Extras

- The Society sent a [letter of support](#) to members of Congress who introduced the [Newborn Screening Saves Lives Reauthorization Act of 2021](#). The bill—last reauthorized in 2014—would renew critical funding for programs that screen newborns for diseases, including various congenital heart defects. The letter also highlighted the STS Congenital Heart Surgery Database, with mention that it is the largest registry in North America dealing with congenital cardiac malformations.
- The Surgical Coalition—a collaboration of surgical societies (including STS)—recently outlined its [2021 Policy and Advocacy Agenda](#). The shared priorities include addressing the physician shortage, improving health equity in surgery, and supporting physician wellness. This agenda will serve as a framework for discussion topics with legislators and other stakeholders.
- STS was among the organizations that endorsed the recently reintroduced [Climate Change Health Protection and Promotion Act of 2021](#). The legislation would prioritize the public health response to climate change by implementing efforts such as providing technical support to state and local health departments, tracking environmental and disease data, and developing a coordinated research and preparedness agenda on climate and health.
- US Senator John Boozman (R-AR) was named [STS Legislator of the Year](#) in recognition of his longstanding commitment to health care policies that impact cardiothoracic surgeons and their patients. “We are living through some of the most challenging times many of us have ever experienced. The health care industry was tested in ways we never dreamed of, and it showed the resilience of physicians, medical providers, and their staff. To be recognized by The Society of Thoracic Surgeons at a time like this is something I will always be grateful for and will also serve as an inspiring reminder of the importance of supporting our health care professionals,” he said.





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