
Medicaid Now Pays for Breast Cancer Surgery at CRMC

Thanks to action taken by Cortland Regional Medical Center (CRMC) administrators and a representative of its medical staff, Medicaid patients who need mastectomy and lumpectomy procedures will once again have their surgery paid for at CRMC. The medical center successfully appealed a policy enacted in early 2009 by the NYS Department of Health which impacted CRMC, as well as seven other Central New York hospitals and surgery centers. The state's Medicaid program had decided it would not pay for breast cancer surgery at facilities that performed fewer than 30 of the operations a year. It cited research stating that women who get the surgery at higher volume hospitals have better survival rates.

In its appeal, CRMC argued that 50% of its women's health patients are Medicaid recipients. The new policy posed an unnecessary hardship on Medicaid breast cancer patients, forcing them to travel great distances for surgery, when the quality care they needed was already available to them at their local hospital. The medical center presented data showing that CRMC surgeons had performed 172 breast surgeries over a three-year period.

"A breast cancer diagnosis is a frightening prospect for any woman," said Brian Mitteer, CRMC President/Chief Executive Officer. "Why add to that anxiety by making them go out of town for vital surgery, away from supportive family and friends? Especially when we have experienced, board certified surgeons right here who have the skills to do the procedure."

CRMC also pointed out in its appeal that it provides the only comprehensive breast cancer services in Cortland County. It offers women a complete program from diagnosis to surgery to easy access to local post surgery treatments.

"We maintained that what really improves breast cancer survival rates is when women have access to comprehensive breast cancer services in their community," said Dr. Wayne Cotie, a general surgeon. "There needs to be a comprehensive plan. Surgery is one component, but just as crucial are the follow-up radiation and medical oncology treatments. The Cortland medical community is strong in all three areas."

Recognizing the critical nature of early breast cancer detection, CRMC has established itself as a regional leader by making significant financial investment in advanced diagnostic technologies. It was one of the first facilities in Upstate New York to use digital mammography and to perform stereotactic biopsies, which were added to existing ultrasound and MRI modalities.

"The medical center has made a tremendous commitment to offering access to early breast cancer detection and diagnosis," said Rosemary Barletta, CRMC Director of Medical Imaging/Cardiology. "In fact, 69% of Cortland County's positive breast cancer cases are diagnosed at CRMC. If Medicaid will pay for a mammogram here, and pay for radiation or chemotherapy treatments by CRMC physicians after surgery, then it seems logical to complete the continuum of care and allow Medicaid patients to have their surgery here as well."

In addition to the benefit to area women with Medicaid, Dr. Cotie saw another positive to the appeal process. “Here was an instance where a government agency enacted a policy based on a study. We presented a case challenging their data, the agency listened to our arguments, and ultimately reversed its policy. It’s encouraging to see an example where the system of government works with local communities on an issue.”

“I think the community should be proud of the leadership of Cortland Regional Medical Center for challenging the Medicaid breast cancer payment policy,” concluded Barletta. “The hospital took a stand and fought on behalf of Cortland area women to give them access to an important local service. It required a huge effort but was the right thing to do.”

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