



UNIVERSITY EYE INSTITUTE

## UEI Coding Alert # 37 September 27, 2006

### **New Patient Vs. Established patient**

By CPT definition, a **new patient** is *one who has not received any professional services from the doctor, or another doctor of the same specialty who belongs to the same group practice, within the past three years.* By contrast, an **established patient** *has received professional services from the doctor or another doctor in the same group and the same specialty within the prior three years.*

The distinction between new and established patients applies only to the categories of evaluation and management (E/M) services titled "Office or Other Outpatient Services", and "General Ophthalmological Services".

For the **new patient codes**, the required components and the relative value units (RVUs) are greater (require more work by the doctor) than for **established patient codes** at the same level. So in some cases, not distinguishing new patients from established patient's amounts to shortchanging yourself.

Although **single specialty groups** with **multiple practice locations** may operate independently, with each caring for its own patient population and maintaining its own medical records, they are considered a single group if they have the same tax identification number.

In a **single-specialty practice**, the patient's encounter should be reported with a code in a new patient category only if ***no doctor*** has seen the patient within the last three years.

In a **multi-specialty practice**, a patient might be considered new even if he or she has received care from several other doctors in the group and a medical record is available. The distinguishing factor here is the specialty designation of the provider. The Medicare Claims Processing Manual says "*doctors in the same group practice but are in different specialties may bill and be paid without regard to their membership in the same group.*" (Chapter 12, Section 30.6.5). Optometrists and Ophthalmologist in the same group fall into this classification.

### **Consultations vs. New Patient Visits**

If a patient is sent to you for an **opinion or advice**, the encounter may be a consultation service rather than a new patient encounter. CPT defines a consultation as "a type of service provided by a physician whose opinion or advice regarding evaluation and/or management of a specific problem is requested by another doctor or other appropriate source." For example, if you are asked to see a patient for the evaluation of a medical problem, the appropriate category might be consultation services. Since the same consultation codes apply to both new and established patients, it is not necessary to apply the new patient definition.