Is ‘Non-contributory’ for Family History Acceptable

By: Mike Enos, Compliance Specialist for MedSafe

Many providers have asked, “Is it acceptable to use the phrase ‘noncontributory, unremarkable, or negative’ to describe past family or social history?” This is an excellent question. In some cases, the past medical history is so significant that the family history may not seem relevant. This might be the case for a 98 year old with a 30+ year known history of CAD who is seen in the hospital by a cardiologist.

Unfortunately, neither CMS nor any of the regional Medicare Administrative Contractors (MAC) have stated that they will accept those phrases. In fact, most of them flatly state that they will not give credit for a family history that is documented as ‘noncontributory.’ This is because this phrase does not indicate what was addressed. Did the nurse or physician ask specific questions (any family history of heart disease?)

For new patients or initial hospital care services, this can make a big difference. Without a complete past medical, family and social history (PFSH), it is impossible to document a comprehensive history. This renders a level 4 or 5 new patient office visit or consult, or level 2 or 3 initial hospital service unobtainable based on the required components.

In order to ensure proper credit is given, it is recommended to document either your positive findings relating to the patient’s medical, family, or social history, or at least document a pertinent negative finding. This will avoid any confusion that could be caused by use of the phrase ‘noncontributory.’

For more information about the documentation requirements for E/M services, see the Medicare Learning Network’s official CMS Evaluation and Management Services Guide

About the Author:

Mike Enos, CPC,CPMA,CEMC is a billing compliance specialist for Medsafe: The Total Compliance Solution. Mike is a certified coder, evaluation and management coding expert, chart auditor, and coding instructor. Mike is also an active member of the American Academy of Professional Coders (AAPC) and Medical Group Management Association (MGMA), and has contributed articles to the MGMA Connexion magazine as well as to AAPC Coder’s Edge.