

Department of Health and Human Services

**OFFICE OF  
INSPECTOR GENERAL**

**Beneficiary Awareness of HCFA  
Publications in 1995**



**JUNE GIBBS BROWN  
Inspector General**

**APRIL 1997  
OEI-04-93-00152**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## PURPOSE

To determine Medicare beneficiary awareness of Health Care Financing Administration publications.

## BACKGROUND

The Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) publishes various booklets designed to help Medicare beneficiaries make informed health care decisions. The booklets are available from several sources, such as Social Security offices and senior citizen organizations. However, the department has little information on the extent that beneficiaries know the booklets are available.

As part of our 1995 survey to determine beneficiary satisfaction with Medicare, we asked beneficiaries about their awareness of the *Medicare Handbook* and eight other HCFA publications. The nine publications included the handbook and six booklets we reported on in 1994.

## FINDINGS

### *Most beneficiaries were aware of the Medicare Handbook*

Three-fourths of the beneficiaries surveyed in 1994 and 1995 said they knew about the *Medicare Handbook*.

### *In 1995, fewer beneficiaries used the handbook than in 1994*

In 1994, 58 percent of the beneficiaries who were aware of the handbook said they had used it in the past year. This number significantly decreased to 38 percent in 1995.

### *Few beneficiaries were aware of selected HCFA publications*

- Twenty-six percent of the Medicare beneficiaries who responded to our survey were aware of HCFA's *Guide to Health Insurance for People with Medicare Coverage*.
- Eighteen percent of the Medicare beneficiaries who responded to our survey were aware of HCFA's booklet on *Medicare and Other Health Benefits*.
- Ten percent of the Medicare beneficiaries who responded to our survey were aware of HCFA's booklet on *Medicare and Home Medical Equipment*.

- Nine percent of the Medicare beneficiaries who responded to our survey were aware of HCFA's booklet on *How to Help Stop Medicare from Being Ripped Off*.
- Eight percent of the Medicare beneficiaries who responded to our survey were aware of HCFA's booklet on *Medicare Hospice Benefits*.
- Seven percent of the Medicare beneficiaries who responded to our survey were aware of HCFA's booklet on *Medicare Coverage for Second Surgical Opinions*.
- Seven percent of the Medicare beneficiaries who responded to our survey were aware of HCFA's *Guide to Choosing a Nursing Home*.
- Five percent of the Medicare beneficiaries who responded to our survey were aware of HCFA's booklet on *Medicare and Coordinated Care Plans*.

***Most beneficiaries do not know how to obtain HCFA publications***

Seventy-five percent of the beneficiaries said they did not know how to obtain the free publications.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

We realize that awareness of the publications may depend on a beneficiary's needs. However, beneficiaries cannot benefit from HCFA's guidance if they do not know the information is available.

We recommend that HCFA (1) continue current efforts, as well as experiment with new methods, to develop a more effective strategy to increase beneficiary awareness of their publications, and (2) reinstate the listing of HCFA publications in the *Medicare Handbook*, and provide instructions in the handbook on how beneficiaries can obtain the publications.

**AGENCY COMMENTS**

The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation concurred with our recommendations.

The HCFA Administrator concurred with our recommendation that HCFA should continue efforts to develop a more effective strategy to increase beneficiary awareness. He reported that HCFA has established an Internet site that lists available publications, and includes the text of each publication.

The Administrator did not concur with our recommendation to reinstate a listing of HCFA publications in the *Medicare Handbook*. He stated that HCFA believes the 1996 handbook contains a better option by providing a State-by-state listing of

Medicare carriers, insurance counseling offices, and other organizations beneficiaries can call through toll-free numbers to get publications.

We still believe it would be useful to list the publications as we recommended. However, if that is not practical, we hope HCFA will consider mentioning in the handbook that publications are available on various topics, such as choosing a nursing home and Medigap insurance. Further, we suggest that the handbook inform beneficiaries that the publications are available from the organizations listed. If beneficiaries do not know the publications exist, they will not know to call these organizations to get copies.

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# INTRODUCTION

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## PURPOSE

To determine Medicare beneficiary awareness of Health Care Financing Administration publications.

## BACKGROUND

### *Medicare Program*

Medicare is a Federal health insurance program for individuals age 65 and older and for certain categories of disabled people. Authorized in 1965 by title XVIII of the Social Security Act, Medicare paid benefits in 1995 totalling over \$159 billion to approximately 37.6 million beneficiaries.<sup>1</sup> The Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) within the Department of Health and Human Services has responsibility for the Medicare program.

### *HCFA Publications*

HCFA publishes a Medicare handbook for beneficiaries that explains how the Medicare program works and what the benefits are. HCFA also publishes various booklets designed to help beneficiaries make informed health care decisions. The booklets provide (1) guidance on Medicare coverage for specific services, such as hospice and second surgical opinions, (2) advice on criteria beneficiaries should consider in selecting services, such as nursing home care and supplemental health insurance, and (3) tips that should alert beneficiaries to fraudulent activities.

HCFA publishes a new handbook every year, but generally mails it only to new enrollees. Prior to 1995, the year of our survey, the last mailing to all beneficiaries was in 1990. In 1996, the year following our survey, HCFA again mailed a new handbook to all beneficiaries. HCFA officials now are considering the feasibility of mailing a new handbook to all beneficiaries every year. The handbook and other booklets are available upon request from several sources, such as Social Security offices, insurance offices that process Medicare claims (called carriers), and senior citizen organizations. However, the Department has little information on the extent that beneficiaries know the booklets are available.

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<sup>1</sup>Health Care Financing Administration, United States Department of Health and Human Services. Data compendium, March 1995.

## *Previous Surveys*

In 1993, the Office of Inspector General conducted a survey of Medicare beneficiaries to determine their awareness of the Medicare handbook and two booklets published by HCFA.<sup>2</sup> In 1994, we conducted a similar survey of Medicare beneficiaries, and asked about their awareness of the handbook and seven booklets.<sup>3</sup>

In both surveys, we found that while most beneficiaries (about three-fourths) were aware of the handbook, less than a fourth knew about the booklets.

## **METHODS**

In September 1995, we mailed a questionnaire to 1244 randomly selected Medicare beneficiaries for whom Part B claims had been filed in Calendar Year 1994. We used standard equations for estimating sample size with a binary response variable.

Beneficiary participation in the survey was voluntary. A total of 942 beneficiaries returned completed questionnaires, for a response rate of 76 percent. Percentages in the report are based on the number of people answering each question. Based on our response rate, estimates are within 3.2 percent of the true value at the 95 percent confidence level. The individual findings may be less precise, depending on the number of beneficiaries who responded to specific questions. Appendix A shows beneficiary responses to the questionnaire.

As part of our 1995 survey to determine beneficiary satisfaction with Medicare,<sup>4</sup> we asked beneficiaries about their awareness of nine HCFA publications. The nine publications included the *Medicare Handbook*, and eight other HCFA publications. The nine publications are described below.

- HCFA's *Medicare Handbook* explains the Medicare program and benefits.
- HCFA's *Guide to Health Insurance for People with Medicare Coverage* booklet provides information on (1) Medicare coverage, (2) types of Medigap policies, and (3) tips for purchasing Medigap insurance.

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<sup>2</sup>Office of Inspector General, United States Department of Health and Human Services. *Use of Nursing Home and Medigap Guides*. OEI-04-92-00481, May 1994.

<sup>3</sup>Office of Inspector General, United States Department of Health and Human Services. *Beneficiary Awareness of HCFA Publications*. OEI-04-94-00141, June 1995.

<sup>4</sup>Office of Inspector General, United States Department of Health and Human Services. *Medicare Beneficiary Satisfaction: 1995*. OEI-04-93-00150.

- HCFA's *Medicare and Other Health Benefits* booklet explains how Medicare coordinates with other insurance that beneficiaries may have, such as Medigap, employer health plans, and Workman's Compensation.
- HCFA's *Medicare and Home Medical Equipment* booklet explains how Medicare pays for medical equipment beneficiaries use in their homes.
- HCFA's *How to Help Stop Medicare from Being Ripped Off* booklet describes what beneficiaries can do to prevent Medicare fraud.
- HCFA's *Medicare Hospice Benefits* booklet explains (1) hospice services, (2) eligibility requirements, and (3) Medicare payments for hospice services.
- HCFA's *Medicare Coverage for Second Surgical Opinions* booklet provides information on (1) when beneficiaries should get second surgical opinions, (2) how to find physicians to give second surgical opinions, and (3) Medicare payments for second surgical opinions.
- HCFA's *Guide to Choosing a Nursing Home* booklet contains information on (1) factors to consider in selecting a nursing home, and (2) Medicare and Medicaid coverage of nursing home care.
- HCFA's *Medicare and Coordinated Care Plans* booklet contains information on managed health care plans (health maintenance organizations and competitive medical plans) that contract with HCFA to provide health care for Medicare beneficiaries.

### ***Comparison to Previous Surveys***

During our 1993, 1994, and 1995 surveys, we asked Medicare beneficiaries similar questions about the *Medicare Handbook*. We compare their responses in this report.

We asked Medicare beneficiaries similar questions about two of HCFA's publications in our 1993, 1994, and 1995 surveys. In 1994 and 1995, we asked similar questions about six of the publications. For those publications on which we asked similar questions in more than one survey year, we calculated the percentage of responses so that they were comparable from year to year.

We have determined significant differences in responses to the 1994 and 1995 surveys through the use of a t-test.

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We conducted this inspection in accordance with the *Quality Standards for Inspections* issued by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

# FINDINGS

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## **MOST BENEFICIARIES WERE AWARE OF THE *MEDICARE HANDBOOK***

About three-fourths of the beneficiaries surveyed said they knew about the *Medicare Handbook*. Table 1 illustrates that the percent of beneficiaries who knew of the handbook has changed little since 1993.

**TABLE 1  
BENEFICIARY AWARENESS OF THE MEDICARE HANDBOOK**

1993	1994	1995
76%	76%	75%

## **FEWER BENEFICIARIES USED THE *MEDICARE HANDBOOK* THAN IN 1994**

Table 2 shows that the number of beneficiaries who had used the *Medicare Handbook* significantly declined in 1995.

Of the beneficiaries who had used the handbook, 94 percent thought the handbook was helpful. Beneficiaries responded virtually the same in our 1993, 1994, and 1995 surveys.

**TABLE 2  
BENEFICIARY USE OF THE MEDICARE HANDBOOK**

	1993	1994	1995
Percent of Beneficiaries Aware of the Handbook Who Used It in Past Year	55%	58%	38%

In 1993, 1994, and 1995, half of the beneficiaries surveyed said they would refer to their *Medicare Handbook* to get information about what Medicare pays for.

We hope to obtain additional information about beneficiary use of the handbook for our survey about the *1996 Medicare Handbook*.

## FEW BENEFICIARIES WERE AWARE OF HCFA's OTHER PUBLICATIONS

Table 3 illustrates that from 5 to 26 percent of the 942 beneficiaries responding to our survey in 1995 were aware of HCFA's other publications.

**TABLE 3  
AWARENESS OF HCFA PUBLICATIONS**

PUBLICATION	BENEFICIARIES AWARE		
	1993	1994	1995
Guide to Health Insurance for People with Medicare Coverage	13%	24%	26%
Medicare and Other Health Benefits	*	14%	18%
Medicare and Home Medical Equipment	*	*	10%
How to Help Stop Medicare from Being Ripped Off	*	*	9%
Medicare Hospice Benefits	*	9%	8%
Medicare Coverage for Second Surgical Opinions	*	9%	7%
Guide to Choosing a Nursing Home	9%	8%	7%
Medicare and Coordinated Care Plans	*	6%	5%
*If no percentages are shown, we did not ask about the publication in that particular year.			

The publications most familiar to beneficiaries related to insurance policies that supplement Medicare. We realize that awareness of the other publications may depend on a beneficiary's needs. For example, it is understandable that a beneficiary who has not needed surgery may not be aware of the publication on second surgical opinions.

## MOST BENEFICIARIES DO NOT KNOW HOW TO OBTAIN HCFA PUBLICATIONS

Seventy-five percent of the beneficiaries surveyed said they did not know how to obtain HCFA's free publications.

HCFA publications provide information that Medicare beneficiaries and their families may use to make informed health care decisions. Publications such as the *Medicare Handbook* and the *Guide to Health Insurance for People with Medicare* have broader

applicability to beneficiaries. We noted that the rate of awareness for these publications is higher than for other publications. We also realize that awareness of some of the other publications, such as the booklet on choosing a nursing home, may depend on a beneficiary's needs. However, beneficiaries cannot benefit from HCFA's guidance if they do not know the information is available.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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We are aware that HCFA has implemented several initiatives to improve distribution of existing publications. For example, HCFA has worked with the Social Security Administration and the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs to make HCFA information more accessible to beneficiaries. However, awareness of the publications has not improved.

HCFA is now considering the feasibility of mailing the *Medicare Handbook* to all beneficiaries every year. Prior to 1996, the *Medicare Handbook* listed some of HCFA's publications and included an order form beneficiaries could use to obtain the publications. However, this list and form has been deleted from the new handbook. To contain the cost of mailing, HCFA cut the number of pages of the *1996 Medicare Handbook* by revising the format and including fewer details.

**We recommend that HCFA**

- **continue current efforts, as well as experiment with new methods, to develop a more effective strategy to increase beneficiary awareness of their publications.** For example, HCFA could distribute publications, or a listing of publications through offices of physicians and other health care providers.
- **reinstate the listing of HCFA publications in the *Medicare Handbook*, and provide instructions in the handbook on how beneficiaries can obtain the publications.**

## AGENCY COMMENTS

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The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation concurred with our recommendations.

The HCFA Administrator concurred with our recommendation that HCFA should continue efforts to develop a more effective strategy to increase beneficiary awareness. He reported that HCFA has established an Internet site that lists available publications, and includes the text of each publication.

The Administrator did not concur with our recommendation to reinstate a listing of HCFA publications in the *Medicare Handbook*. He stated that HCFA believes the 1996 handbook contains a better option by providing a State-by-state listing of Medicare carriers, insurance counseling offices, and other organizations beneficiaries can call through toll-free numbers to get publications.

We still believe it would be useful to list the publications as we recommended. However, if that is not practical, we hope HCFA will consider mentioning in the handbook that publications are available on various topics, such as choosing a nursing home and Medigap insurance. Further, we suggest that the handbook inform beneficiaries that the publications are available from the organizations listed. If beneficiaries do not know the publications exist, they will not know to call these organizations to get copies.

Appendix B contains the full text of HCFA's comments.

# APPENDIX A

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## RESPONSES TO 1995 SURVEY OF MEDICARE BENEFICIARIES (942 Respondents)

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Question	Responses	Percentage
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1. **Where would you go to get information about what Medicare pays for?**

The following are some places people might go to get answers if they have questions about what Medicare pays for. Check all the places you would go to find out what Medicare pays for.

(N = 908 - Number Responding to Question)

Your doctor's office	632	70
Friend or relative	104	11
AARP or other membership organization	126	14
Insurance company that processes your Medicare claims	367	40
Medigap insurance company	209	23
Social Security office	299	33
Local senior citizen's group	58	6
Insurance salesperson	27	3
<i>Medicare Handbook</i>	506	56
Medicare Peer Review Organization	38	4
State's Information, Counseling, and Assistance office	26	3
Other	40	4
Not Answering:	28	

Question	Responses	Percentage
2. Listed below are Medicare booklets that you can obtain free of charge. Please check the booklets you were aware of <u>before today</u> .		
<i>Guide to Health Insurance for People with Medicare</i>	249	26
<i>Guide to Choosing a Nursing Home</i>	69	7
<i>Medicare Coverage for Second Surgical Opinion</i>	67	7
<i>Medicare Hospice Benefits</i>	75	8
<i>Medicare and Coordinated Care Plans</i>	43	5
<i>Medicare and Other Health Benefits</i>	173	18
<i>Medicare and Home Medical Equipment</i>	93	10
<i>How to Help Medicare from Being Ripped Off</i>	81	9
Number Who Checked One or More Publications:	405	

3. How many times in the past year have you used your Medicare Handbook? (Check one answer.)

1 to 3 times	202	23
More than 3 times	53	6
I have not used the <i>Medicare Handbook</i> in the past year	410	46
I do not know what the <i>Medicare Handbook</i> is	45	5
I do not recall receiving a <i>Medicare Handbook</i>	173	20
Not Answering: 59		

Question	Responses	Percentage
4. Do you think the <i>Medicare Handbook</i> is: (Check <u>one</u> answer.)		
(N = 255 - Number Who Had Used Handbook)		
Very Helpful	97	39
Generally Helpful	135	55
Generally Not Helpful	11	5
Not Helpful	3	1
Not Answering: 9		

# APPENDIX B

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## HCFA COMMENTS



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Health Care Financing Administration

The Administrator  
Washington, D.C. 20201

DATE: FEB - 9 1997

FROM: Bruce C. Vladeck *Bruce Vladeck*  
Administrator

SUBJECT: Office of Inspector General (OIG) Draft Report: "Beneficiary Awareness of HCFA Publications in 1995," (OEI-04-93-00152)

TO: June Gibbs Brown  
Inspector General

We reviewed the above-referenced report that examines Medicare beneficiary awareness of nine Health Care Financing Administration publications.

Our detailed comments on the report recommendations are attached for your consideration. Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this report.

Attachment

NI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
EAIG	<input type="checkbox"/>
SAIG	<input type="checkbox"/>
PDIG	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
DIG-AS	<input type="checkbox"/>
DIG-EC	<input type="checkbox"/>
DIG-EI	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
DIG-OI	<input type="checkbox"/>
DIG-MP	<input type="checkbox"/>
AIG-LC	<input type="checkbox"/>
OGC/IG	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
ExecSec	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Date Sent	2-13

Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) Comments  
on Office of Inspector General (OIG) Draft Report:  
"Beneficiary Awareness of HCFA Publications in 1995."  
(OEI-04-93-00152)

OIG Recommendation

The Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) should continue current efforts as well as experiment with new methods to develop a more effective strategy to increase beneficiary awareness of its publications. For example, HCFA could distribute publications, or a listing of publications through physicians' and health care providers' offices.

HCFA Comments

We concur. We took a number of actions in 1996 of which we are especially proud in light of the constraints placed on the Agency by both the furlough early in the year and the ongoing budget limitations. We distributed a revised user-friendly version of the "Medicare Handbook" to all beneficiaries that was extensively field-tested by a contractor prior to publication. Alternative formats of the "Medicare Handbook" for the visually-impaired (large-print, braille, and audio cassette) were also made available. In addition, the publication was translated into Spanish and distributed.

Other actions HCFA took to broaden public awareness of its publications are:

- o Established an Internet web site that not only announces the availability of publications but includes two versions, i.e., a text-only copy and the actual copy that includes graphics.
- o Implemented a "Publication Alert" announcement that is sent out to our partners, e.g., peer review organizations (PROs), intermediaries/carriers, in advance of the actual mailing of the publications.
- o Developed a more sophisticated computerized address maintenance system to distribute publication alerts and actual publications to our partners who provide this information to the general public. The address lists include PROs and intermediaries/carriers, as well as end-stage renal disease networks, Insurance Counseling Assistance grantees, state agencies, consumer and professional advocacy and support organizations, and the Social Security Administration.

- o Continued efforts with the HCFA On-Line activities as well as customer service pilots with contractors. We plan to focus on the results of the contractor service pilots and share customer service best practices with all contractors.
- o Reached out to a wide variety of beneficiary advocacy groups. HCFA and the Administration on Aging funded elements of the Aging Network and other departmental entities where constituencies overlap. As a result of this outreach, we increased our presence and voice among this group and developed additional channels for distribution and feedback.

We believe the above efforts have produced measurable improvement in beneficiary awareness of HCFA publications.

#### OIG Recommendation

HCFA should reinstate the listing of HCFA publications in the "Medicare Handbook" and provide instructions on how to obtain them.

#### HCFA Comments

We do not concur. We believe the 1996 "Medicare Handbook" contains a better option. It provides a complete state-by-state listing of Medicare carriers, PROs, Medicare durable medical equipment regional carriers, and state insurance counseling offices. In addition, the "Medicare Handbook" also provides toll free 1-800 numbers for both the general public and those who are text telephone users.