One-Day Workshop on Using Medicare Claims Data

September 21, 2006

National Bureau of Economic Research
1050 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02138

There are many potential uses of Medicare claims data in health economics and health policy research. The data are detailed and cover nearly every elderly person age 65 and over (N = 35+ million). Longitudinal analysis is possible and there is very little attrition, except through death.

However, the data files are also quite complicated and need to be used with great care. Research questions may not be adaptable to standard research designs or to any single data file that is currently offered by Medicare. For example, indicators of managed care enrollment appear in more than one file location, and researchers need to know which is best for their purpose. A key variable may require combining data from multiple claims and enrollment files, and there are many pitfalls in constructing decade-long panel data.

There is also a "Catch 22" for new users: to gain access to the Medicare claims data, one needs to have a federally funded grant. Yet it is nearly impossible to be funded without preliminary results from the claims data.

On September 21, 2006, the National Bureau of Economic Research will host a workshop to help researchers understand and use the full set of Medicare claims files. The workshop will be led by Thomas Bubolz, Ph.D. from Dartmouth College and will cover:

- Understanding file content, structure and potential applications of the Medicare claims data.
- Developing methods for managing data, creating indicators, and planning analyses.
- Demonstrating how rates of treatment and expenditures for diseases can be estimated for population or patient subgroups.

A special "training database" has been developed to facilitate the objectives of the workshop. These files contain detailed information based on information from highly confidential Research Identifiable Files. However, fuzzing data and encrypting calendar dates (among other methods) ensure that individuals can never be identified from this training data. Participants may register for and use the training database at their home institution.

The workshop will be held at the NBER in Cambridge, MA on the afternoon of September 21, 2006. A light lunch will be provided at 12:00, and sessions will run from 1:00 to 4:00 pm. There are limited funds to assist in travel for the workshop. It is open on a space available basis to all academic researchers and graduate students in economics or any related field. If you would like to attend, please RSVP online at www.nber.org/confer/reply/mcd.html . If you have any other questions or would like to request funds for travel, please contact Joan Stillwell via email at stillwel@nber.org.

Dr. Thomas Bubolz has been on the faculty at Dartmouth Medical School since 1986. He is Senior Research Associate and Senior Lecturer in Community and Family Medicine. Dr. Bubolz was a member of CMS's Research Data Assistance Center (ResDAC) where he was Deputy Project Director for training and outreach activities. From 1993-2002 Dr. Bubolz taught ECS 143, a practicum in claims data analysis for health policy and epidemiology in the graduate program at Dartmouth's Center for the Evaluative Clinical Sciences.