

Consumers Digest
August 2004
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Scammers Roll Out Wheelchair Fraud

In 2003, the government-run Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) initiated a program called “Operation Wheeler Dealer” to crack down on fraudulent power-wheelchair/scooter reimbursement claims. But what started out as a much-needed initiative to recoup government payouts may have gone too far, one industry lobbyist says.

One result of the government’s crackdown, Eric Sokol, director of the Power Mobility Coalition, tells Consumers Digest, is that four insurance companies – known as the Durable Medical Equipment Regional Carriers – that are charged with processing claims for CMS recently added an “iron-fisted” requirement to Operation Wheeler Dealer. The provision states that only people who are considered “non-ambulatory” – which means they can’t walk even with an aid and aren’t able to roll the wheels of a traditional wheelchair around the house – can receive power-mobility benefits.

Since Medicare pays 80 percent of the cost of power-mobility devices that can run upward of \$5,000 some unscrupulous suppliers found it easy pickings for bilking the government out of more than \$100 million. They even enticed dishonest doctors to write prescriptions by offering kickbacks.

Some suppliers would use scare tactics to convince the elderly that they needed power mobility even if they didn’t. Some people never got the wheelchairs they were promised; they either received an inferior product or nothing at all.

Consumers “only get one bite of this power mobility apple,” Sokol says. “If you get caught up in these schemes, and a claim is made on your behalf by a fraudulent supplier...and Medicare has already paid that claim, you’re S-O-L as a beneficiary to get power mobility in the future.”

Sokol suggests consumers do research before choosing a supplier. Ask people you trust for references. If you smell a scam, contact the Office of the Inspector General at 800/447-8477.