

Firms fighting Medicare policy

March 1, 2004, WASHINGTON - Medicare is refusing to pay for Andy Campbell's recently delivered \$6,242 motorized wheelchair despite the advanced prostate cancer and heart disease that makes his every step painful.

But Campbell, 62, of Henderson, Nev., will not be stuck with the bill under Medicare rules. Unless the government changes its mind, the Scooter Store, based in New Braunfels, will absorb the loss.

The medical-equipment company and four other businesses are undertaking a national lobbying campaign, starting with a commitment of about \$250,000, to challenge Medicare's new get-tough policy on reimbursements for power wheelchairs.

The coalition says companies such as the Scooter Store and Invacare, based in Elyria, Ohio, will be reluctant to provide the wheelchairs without upfront payments from patients.

In September, officials with the government health-care program for 40 million older and disabled people ordered more scrutiny of claims for power wheelchairs, which cost \$5,000 or more, depending on accessories. Medicare ordered its insurance contractors to strictly enforce a policy that normally limits reimbursements to those unable to walk.

Timothy Hill, Medicare's chief financial officer, said the lobbying is more about profits than patients. Hill said he does not accept the industry theory that more claims will be rejected under the heightened scrutiny.

He said the companies behind the lobbying are large and have big marketing operations. "We're not hearing from therapy centers and small mom-and-pop stores working with physicians on a one-on-one basis," he said.

Campbell, who was a policeman in Santa Monica, Calif., is more concerned with his newfound freedom to move around the house than a high-stakes lobbying effort.

"My wife is my primary helper, and I had to ask her to bring everything to me," he said. "Now I can go into the kitchen and restroom. I'm able to do a lot of things without bothering her."

The Scooter Store determined that Campbell would qualify for

reimbursement and took the chance, submitting the claim without first requiring payment. But Cigna Medicare, an insurer working by contract for Medicare, rejected the claim.

The Scooter Store says that, following its policy, it will not take back the chair. Medicare does not forbid repossession.

In November, The Associated Press reported that the Health and Human Services inspector general identified \$167 million in fraudulent power-wheelchair claims and had 50 active investigations nationwide.

Bob Cheatham of Tulsa, Okla., who uses a power wheelchair, learned the hard way that some equipment stores are reluctant to deliver the equipment.

After trying several stores, he found a company willing to supply a motorized chair without payment. Cheatham, 69, has severe rheumatoid arthritis and cannot walk, so the company seemed likely to be reimbursed for his chair.

A store representative who failed to send the claim "told us right off the bat that there had been too much corruption," Cheatham said. "He told us too many people had beaten Medicare out of money."