

AO-SH-2005-02-01

[Name redacted]

Dear [Name redacted]:

We are writing in response to your request for an advisory opinion concerning the 18-month moratorium on physician self-referrals to specialty hospitals in which they have an ownership or investment interest (the “specialty hospital moratorium”).¹ Specifically, you seek a determination that [name redacted] (the “Hospital”) was “under development” as of November 18, 2003, thereby making the specialty hospital moratorium inapplicable to the Hospital.

You have certified that all of the information provided in your request, including all supplementary materials and documentation, is true and correct and constitutes a complete description of the relevant facts. In issuing this opinion, we have relied solely on the facts and information presented to us. We have not undertaken an independent investigation of this information. If material facts have not been disclosed or have been misrepresented, this advisory opinion is without force and effect.

Based upon the facts certified in your request for an advisory opinion and supplemental submissions, we conclude that the Hospital was “under development” as of November 18, 2003 and is therefore exempt from the specialty hospital moratorium. We note that, although the Hospital is exempt from the specialty hospital moratorium, a referring physician’s ownership or investment interest in the Hospital must comply with the remaining terms of the hospital ownership exception, as set forth in section 1877(d) of the Social Security Act (the “Act”), as interpreted at 42 C.F.R. § 411.356(c). We express no opinion regarding compliance with this exception.²

The arrangement you described in your advisory opinion request may raise potential issues under the anti-kickback statute in section 1128B(b) of the Act (42 U.S.C. § 1320a –7b(b)). The Office of Inspector General (OIG) is the agency with authority to issue opinions on the application of the anti-kickback statute. For additional information on the OIG’s advisory opinion process, you may wish to consult their website (<http://oig.hhs.gov/fraud/advisoryopinions.html>). Issuance of this CMS advisory opinion is not intended to, and should not be construed to, address the propriety of your arrangement under the anti-kickback statute.

This opinion may not be relied on by any individual or entity other than the party that requested it. This opinion is further qualified as set forth in section IV below and in 42 C.F.R. §§ 411.370 through 411.389.

¹ Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003, Pub. L. No. 108-173, § 507.

² Based on the location of the Hospital, the rural provider exception at section 1877(d)(2) of the Act and 42 C.F.R. §411.356(c)(1) is not applicable.

I. STATUTORY BACKGROUND

A. The Physician Self-Referral Prohibition

Under section 1877 of the Act (42 U.S.C. § 1395nn), a physician cannot refer a Medicare patient for certain designated health services (“DHS”) to an entity with which the physician (or an immediate family member of the physician) has a financial relationship, unless an exception applies.³ Section 1877 also prohibits the entity furnishing the DHS from submitting claims to Medicare, or billing the beneficiary or any other entity for Medicare DHS that are furnished as a result of a prohibited referral. Inpatient and outpatient hospital services are included as DHS. A financial relationship includes both ownership/investment interests and compensation arrangements. The statute and regulations enumerate various exceptions, including exceptions for physician ownership or investment interests in hospitals and rural providers. Violations of the statute are subject to denial of payment of all DHS claims that are the subject of the prohibited referrals, refund of amounts collected for such DHS claims, and civil money penalties for knowing violations of the prohibition. Violations may also be pursued under the False Claims Act, 31 U.S.C. §§ 3729-3733.

B. Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003

The Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003 (the “MMA”) amended the hospital and rural provider ownership exceptions to the physician self-referral prohibition. Prior to the MMA, the “whole hospital” exception allowed a physician to refer Medicare patients to a hospital in which the physician (or an immediate family member of the physician) had an ownership or investment interest, as long as the physician was authorized to perform services at the hospital and the ownership or investment interest was in the entire hospital and not in only a subdivision of the hospital. Section 507 of the MMA added an additional criterion to the whole hospital exception, specifying that for the 18-month period beginning on December 8, 2003 and ending on June 8, 2005, physician ownership and investment interests in “specialty hospitals” would not qualify for the whole hospital exception. Section 507 further specified that, for the same 18-month period, the exception for physician ownership or investment interests in rural providers would not apply in the case of specialty hospitals located in rural areas.

For purposes of section 507 only, a “specialty hospital” is defined as a hospital in one of the 50 States or the District of Columbia that is primarily or exclusively engaged in the care and treatment of one of the following: (i) patients with a cardiac condition; (ii) patients with an orthopedic condition; (iii) patients receiving a surgical procedure; or (iv) patients receiving any other specialized category of services that the Secretary designates as being inconsistent with the purpose of permitting physician ownership and investment interests in a hospital. The term “specialty hospital” does not include any hospital determined by the Secretary to be in operation or “under development” as of November 18, 2003 and for which (i) the number of physician

³ In 1993, the physician self-referral prohibition was made applicable to the Medicaid program. 42 U.S.C. § 1396b(s).

investors has not increased since that date; (ii) the specialized services furnished by the hospital has not changed since that date; and (iii) any increase in the number of beds has occurred only on the main campus of the hospital and does not exceed the greater of five beds or 50% of the beds in the hospital as of that date.

In determining whether a specialty hospital was “under development” as of November 18, 2003, section 507 directs us to consider whether the following had occurred as of that date: (i) architectural plans were completed; (ii) funding was received; (iii) zoning requirements were met; and (iv) necessary approvals from appropriate state agencies were received. A specialty hospital’s failure to satisfy all of these considerations does not necessarily preclude us from determining that a specialty hospital was “under development” as of November 18, 2003. In addition, we may consider any other evidence that we believe would indicate whether a hospital was under development as of November 18, 2003.

II. FACTS

[Name redacted] (“Hospital Partnership”) was formed in July 2001 for the purpose of operating the Hospital. The Hospital Partnership is owned by the following: (i) [name redacted] (“General Partner”); (ii) 28 local physicians; (iii) an out-of-state partnership representing 54 physician and non-physician investors (including two physicians who have ownership interests in both the Hospital Partnership and General Partner); and (iv) [name redacted] (“Management Company”), a national health care management company specializing in the development of ambulatory surgery centers and specialty hospitals. The General Partner is owned by the same entities enumerated in items (ii)-(iv) above. This advisory opinion was requested by the Hospital Partnership and the General Partner (collectively, the “Requestors”).

[Name redacted] (“Real Estate Company”) was formed to acquire real estate and to develop and construct a medical complex that will house the Hospital as well as medical offices. Real Estate Company is owned by [name redacted] (“Investment Company”) and [name redacted] (“Medical Partnership”), a limited liability partnership whose partners include professional associations representing six physicians who have partnership interests in the Requestors.

The Requestors certified that the Hospital will occupy one floor of a three-story medical office building being constructed by Real Estate Company. Construction of the Hospital began in July 2003. The Hospital Partnership will lease the hospital building from Real Estate Company, and Management Company will manage the Hospital’s daily operations.⁴

The Requestors certified that the Hospital will focus almost exclusively on surgical procedures. All referring physician investors will be members of the Hospital’s active medical staff and will refer patients to, and perform services regularly at, the Hospital.

⁴ We express no opinion regarding any indirect financial relationship that may exist between the Hospital and any referring physician who has a direct or indirect financial relationship with Real Estate Company or Management Company.

A. Architectural Plans

The Requestors have certified that all architectural plans were completed and submitted for state agency review by the end of July 2003, including foundation plans; under-floor mechanical, electrical, plumbing and steel superstructure plans and related specifications for under-floor and structural work; and completed architectural drawings governing the exterior pre-cast concrete and glass/aluminum skin of the building and related specifications.

B. Funding

The Requestors certified that a substantial amount of funding had been received and expended before November 18, 2003. The Requestors certified that the total projected cost for the Hospital project is [approximately 6 million dollars]. In order to raise capital for the Hospital, each of the Requestors conducted a security offering which raised a total of [approximately 1 million dollars]. In January 2003, the Real Estate Company purchased for [approximately 2 million dollars] the land on which the Hospital and medical office building are being constructed. In January 2003, the Real Estate Company closed two construction loans totaling [approximately 14 million dollars] to finance construction of the Hospital and medical office building complex. By November 18, 2003, [approximately \$400,000] of the securities offerings and [approximately 2 million dollars] of the construction loans had been disbursed relative to the development and construction of the Hospital portion of the project.

C. Zoning Requirements

The Requestors certified that the local jurisdiction does not have a zoning ordinance and therefore no zoning approval was necessary to construct the Hospital on the chosen site.

D. Regulatory Approvals

The state in which the Hospital is located does not require certificate of need review prior to development or construction of a hospital. Applicable state law requires new hospitals to submit preliminary and final architectural plans and specifications to a state agency for plan review and approval before construction begins. The state agency conducts intermediate and final inspections to verify compliance with approved construction documents and applicable rules and standards. Successful completion of the plan review process is required to obtain hospital licensure.

The Requestors certified that an initial application for plan review was filed with the state agency in March 2002. The required set of complete architectural plans was submitted to the state agency by the end of July 2003. In October 2003 the state agency provided comments to the General Partner requesting modifications prior to final approval. Final approval was not received until after November 18, 2003.

III. CONCLUSION

Based on the facts certified by the Requestors, we determine that the Hospital was under development as of November 18, 2003. Accordingly, the specialty hospital moratorium set forth in section 507 of the MMA does not apply to the Hospital.

IV. LIMITATIONS OF THIS OPINION

The limitations that apply to this advisory opinion include the following:

- This opinion shall be without force and effect if the Hospital fails to (i) satisfy the definition of “hospital” in section 1861(e) of the Act; (ii) comply with the hospital conditions of participation set forth in 42 C.F.R. Part 482; or (iii) obtain, or comply with the terms of, a hospital provider agreement.
- This advisory opinion and the validity of the conclusions reached in it are based upon the accuracy of the information that you have presented to us.
- This advisory opinion is relevant only to the specific question(s) posed at the beginning of this opinion. This advisory opinion is limited in scope to the specific facts described in this letter and has no application to other facts, even those that appear to be similar in nature or scope.
- This advisory opinion does not apply to, nor can it be relied upon by, any individual or entity other than the Requestors. This advisory opinion may not be introduced in any matter involving an entity or individual that is not a requestor to this opinion.
- This advisory opinion applies only to the statutory provisions specifically noted above in the first paragraph of this opinion. No opinion is herein expressed or implied with respect to the application of any other Federal, State, or local statute, rule, regulation, ordinance, or other law that may apply to the facts, including, without limitation, the Federal anti-kickback statute (42 U.S.C. § 1320a-7b(b)).
- This advisory opinion will not bind or obligate any agency other than the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Under 42 C.F.R. § 411.382, CMS reserves the right to reconsider the issues posed in this advisory opinion and, where public interest requires, rescind or revoke this opinion.
- This opinion is limited to the proposed arrangement. We express no opinion regarding any other financial arrangements disclosed or referenced in your request letter or supplemental submissions. Moreover, we express no opinion regarding whether a referring physician’s financial relationship with the Hospital satisfies the criteria of any exception under section 1877 of the Act or its implementing regulations.
- This advisory opinion is also subject to any additional limitations set forth at 42 C.F.R. § 411.370 et seq.

Sincerely,

Herb B. Kuhn
Director
Center for Medicare Management