

February 10, 2012

Michael J. Astrue, Commissioner
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Blvd.
Baltimore, MD 21235-0001

Dear Commissioner Astrue:

The undersigned organizations are writing to express our concern and request your assistance with an issue of critical importance to our ongoing, cutting-edge, health care quality improvement efforts. As you are aware, beginning November 1, 2011, the Social Security Administration (SSA) rescinded its policy of sharing death reports that it received from individual states. Reportedly, under the revised opinion of the SSA general counsel, SSA will only share state-originated death information with Federal agencies. This change in policy could compromise the ability of medical specialties utilizing clinical registries to successfully monitor long term patient outcomes. This information has been of vital importance to physicians and researchers who want to evaluate the success of medical interventions and who want to track other medical and public health related trends.

Linking clinical registries to the Social Security Death Master File (SSDMF) allows for the verification of "life status" of patients who otherwise would be lost for follow up after their treatment. Research based on this information helps physicians to provide information to today's patients and families to help them with decision making. Outcomes data gives patients confidence in their medical interventions and demonstrates to patients and their families the durability and long-term benefits of medical procedures. These data also help medical societies when providing information to policymakers and regulators. For example, data can be used in research comparing the long-term effectiveness of alternative treatment strategies. It also has the potential to generate clinical and longitudinal comparative effectiveness research on a national level that can be evaluated based on patient demographics.

Utilizing these data, we have been able to link and follow patients having multiple operations in different institutions, perform long-term follow-up of repeat hospital admissions and additional procedures, and generate Kaplan-Meier survival curves. Physicians have also used these data to evaluate their respective outcomes against the national standard. Research of this sort is already the foundation of research on the safety and effectiveness of medical products and national payment and coverage decisions.

While we respect that statutory changes may be required in order to restore SSA's ability to continue to share these data, we hope that you can agree to work with us and other potential stakeholders to arrive at a mutually acceptable resolution to this problem. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.
Sincerely,

The Society of Thoracic Surgeons
American Academy of Ophthalmology
American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons
American Academy of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery
American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation
American Association for Thoracic Surgery
American Association of Neurological Surgeons
American College of Cardiology
American College of Chest Physicians
American College of Emergency Physicians

American College of Osteopathic Surgeons
American College of Physicians
American College of Radiology
American College of Surgeons
American Geriatrics Society
American Medical Association
American Osteopathic Academy of Orthopedics
American Society of Anesthesiologists
American Society of Cataract & Refractive Surgery
American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons
American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery
American Society of Plastic Surgeons
American Society of Transplant Surgeons
American Urological Association
Anesthesia Quality Institute
Congress of Neurological Surgeons
Heart Failure Society of America
Heart Rhythm Society
North American Spine Society
Obesity Action Coalition
Outcomes Research Consortium
Society for Vascular Surgery
Society of American Gastrointestinal and Endoscopic Surgeons
Society of Gynecologic Oncology
The Obesity Society
The American Society of Breast Surgeons