

More New York doctors shun low reimbursement rates, drop Medicare; patients left frustrated

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Last November, [Dr. Alan Jacobs](#), a neurologist in midtown, made a decision that affected the lives of some 500 [New York](#)-area seniors who were his patients: He dropped out of [Medicare](#).

"I could not make a living anymore seeing Medicare patients," said Jacobs, 48, who used to primarily treat dementia and Alzheimer's and is now focusing on hormones and behavior illnesses.

Two years ago, Medicare deemed much of the treatment Jacobs was providing as medically unnecessary and cut his pay. For nearly a year he continued treating Medicare patients, but ultimately decided it was too costly to his bottom line.

Jacobs is one of a growing number of doctors opting out of Medicare or restricting the number of Medicare patients they'll treat because they deem reimbursement rates too low. The doctor said he knows of about a dozen colleagues who've made a similar move.

"I'm seeing a trend of more experienced doctors dropping Medicare," said [Irene Zelterman](#), a geriatric care manager in [Park Slope, Brooklyn](#). "Some of my clients are forced to go to a doctor who maybe isn't my first choice."

The trend could accelerate further if Congress doesn't act soon. If nothing is done by Dec. 1, Medicare will proceed with an across-the-board payment cut to doctors of 23%.

"This would be a real catastrophe," said [Cecil Wilson](#), president of the [American Medical Association](#), which is lobbying lawmakers hard to prevent the cut.

A recent American Medical Association survey of 9,000 doctors who care for Medicare patients found one-in-five had already chosen to limit the number of Medicare patients in their practice, citing the ongoing threat of future cuts and low payment rates. Among primary care doctors, the percentage was much higher, nearly one-third.

As doctors retreat from Medicare, it's becoming harder for seniors and their caregivers to find good, affordable care.

[Hattie Wiener](#), 74, a holistic life coach who lives on the [Upper West Side](#), said she's being forced to alter the way she searches for doctors.

"When you need a procedure and you get a recommendation from a friend, your first question is: 'Do they accept Medicare?'" Wiener said. "You are forced to go to the doctor that says yes to Medicare, not necessarily the one you want."

According to a study by the [Medicare Payment Advisory Commission](#), which reports to Congress, 22% of Medicare beneficiaries looking for a new doctor in 2008 were having trouble.

For many seniors, opting to remain with a doctor who's dropped Medicare isn't possible because of the hefty cost.

"If a patient chooses a physician not in the Medicare system, the patient bears the entire cost of the treatment," noted [Gideon Schein](#), a partner in Eddy & Schein In-Home Administrators for Seniors in East [Harlem](#). "Supplemental insurance will not kick in. It only covers what Medicare covers."

[Daniel Stokar](#), director of development for Brooklyn HouseCall, a home visit doctor service in [Marine Park, Brooklyn](#), said there are still many worthy doctors who accept Medicare, though it might require some research to find them.

Medicare.gov offers a list of enrolled doctors. But it's best to seek recommendations from people you trust.

"Speak to friends. Check out hospital referral lines," Stokar said.

[Jamie Bassel](#), a chiropractor in midtown, accepts Medicare payments. But he said that he and many of his colleagues in New York Physicians Network, which is open to health care practitioners, are considering dropping out and are concerned about the direction Medicare is taking.

“The last thing I ever want to do is turn away a patient,” Bassel said. “But it’s becoming increasingly challenging.”