

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES

Some of Its Policies and Practices Result in Higher State Costs for the Medical Therapy Program

Audit Highlights . . .

Our review of the Department of Health Services' (department) Medical Therapy Program (MTP) revealed the following:

During fiscal year 2002–03 the department spent \$4.6 million more than state law specifically authorizes because it:

- *Fully funded certain county positions without the express statutory authority to do so.*
- *Used a method for sharing the State's Medicaid program, the California Medical Assistance Program (Medi-Cal), payments with counties that resulted in the State incurring a larger portion of MTP costs than specifically authorized in law.*
- *Did not identify and reap the State's share of Medi-Cal payments made to certain counties for MTP services.*

A majority of MTP claims are denied for Medi-Cal payment due to a child's lack of eligibility.

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REPORT NUMBER 2003-124, AUGUST 2004

Department of Health Services and Los Angeles County's responses as of August 2005

The Joint Legislative Audit Committee (audit committee) requested that the Bureau of State Audits (bureau) review Department of Health Services' (department) and county billing practices for the Medical Therapy Program (MTP) and evaluate whether such practices minimize the State's costs for MTP services. Based on our review, we found:

Finding #1: The Department of Health Services' authority to fully fund certain county costs is unclear.

The department is required to divide MTP costs equally between the State and counties in accordance with Section 123940 of the Health and Safety Code (Section 123940). However, the department has fully funded the costs of county personnel to coordinate with special education programs in public schools. These coordination activities are required under Chapter 1747, Statutes of 1984 (AB 3632). Although AB 3632 does not require it, the department contends that it has the budget authority to pay 100 percent of county costs for coordinating the delivery of MTP services with special education. Despite the department's practice of fully paying for the additional county costs related to coordinating activities under AB 3632, the department has not received express statutory authority to fund these county activities at a level greater than 50 percent of county costs. In particular, neither provisional language in the budget act nor language in the MTP's implementing statute authorizes a deviation from the requirements of Section 123940. Consequently, the department's legal authority to fully fund these county coordination activities is unclear.

Should the Legislature decide to discontinue fully funding county costs for coordinating the delivery of MTP services with special education, it should consider the impact such a decision might

- ☑ *Lacking federal approval, the department allows Medi-Cal to pay MTP claims without requiring that other health care insurers, if any, pay first.*
- ☑ *Limits on the number of times Medi-Cal will pay for certain therapy procedures are a barrier to obtaining Medi-Cal reimbursement for MTP services and may be overly restrictive for children in the MTP.*
- ☑ *Except for Los Angeles, the counties we visited took reasonable steps to follow up on and correct MTP claims denied for Medi-Cal payment.*
- ☑ *The department identified approximately \$24,000 in MTP claims for fiscal year 2003–04 that are covered by the Healthy Families Program, calling into question whether this program will significantly reduce MTP costs in the future.*

have on the State’s overall financial obligations related to special education. Specifically, the State receives federal funding each year under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. As a condition of receiving this federal funding, the State is prohibited from reducing the amount of state financial support for special education and related services below the level of that support in the preceding fiscal year. Failing to maintain this level of state support may cause the State to face a possible reduction in federal special education funds.

We recommended that the department seek specific statutory authority from the Legislature to fully fund county personnel whose jobs include coordinating the MTP with special education agencies as required by AB 3632. Should the Legislature decide to reduce the State’s current funding for these activities, it should consider the implications of such an action on the State’s responsibility under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to maintain a level of funding for special education and related services at least equal to the level of funding the State provided in the preceding fiscal year.

Department’s Action: None.

The department disagrees with the need to seek more specific legal authority for 100 percent state funding for functions associated with implementing the regulations for AB 3632. The department asserts that AB 3632 is a mandate and the funding has been appropriated for this requirement since fiscal year 1998–99. As a result, the department is taking no action at this time.



The department’s assertion that the coordination activities it has fully funded are a state mandate is incorrect. As we indicated on page 49 of the audit report, the Commission on State Mandates (commission) is the authority designated by the Legislature to determine whether a mandate exists. The commission has not determined that a state mandate exists for the MTP coordination activities under AB 3632. Further, the department does not receive an appropriation under the state mandated local programs portion of its annual budget for this purpose.

Finding #2: The department's estimate of the MTP costs counties incur to coordinate with special education may not reflect actual costs.

The department's formula for determining the number of state-funded full-time equivalent positions (FTEs) is divided into two parts. The first part of the formula calculates the number of county FTEs needed for the coordination duties specified in AB 3632. The department inputs the county-reported information on planning areas and therapy units and multiplies it by the number of hours needed annually for liaison duties. The formula assumes 188 hours are necessary per year for coordination activities for each planning area and an additional eight hours per year for each therapy unit. The department also calculates the number of county therapist FTEs needed to participate in special education meetings, using the MTP caseload data each county reports. The department's formula assumes that 85 percent of the children enrolled in the MTP are also receiving services through special education programs and that it takes an MTP representative 0.115 hours per week per child to attend special education team meetings. Although the department developed these workload standards in 1989 to address counties' initial and continuing obligations, staff at the department told us that it has not required county MTPs to complete time studies to validate its workload assumptions.

However, our review revealed that the department's 85 percent estimate is not consistent with the data counties reported to the department. Specifically, in fiscal year 2002–03, counties reported that about 77 percent of children in the MTP were also in special education. In fiscal year 2003–04, this number dropped to 54 percent.

Overall, the department's formula does not result in a reliable estimate of the costs counties incur for coordinating the delivery of MTP services with special education, primarily because the formula is not based on actual data but rather on estimates of needed personnel.

We recommended that the department reevaluate its method for calculating county costs for coordinating the delivery of MTP services with special education services to ensure that amounts reasonably reflect actual county efforts.

Department's Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The department agreed to refine the methodology for calculating the reimbursement for individual counties for mandated work resulting from AB 3632 interagency regulations. The department issued a policy letter on May 20, 2005, revising its prior instructions to counties. In this letter, the department requires counties to annually report data on the number of children receiving both MTP and special education services. Based on this information, the department calculates the number of state funded FTEs for the year. Although this new information on caseload is useful, the department's new procedures do not require counties to report information on the actual costs associated with these activities. Without information on the time spent by county staff on these liaison and coordination activities, the department cannot know whether the amounts it is paying are reasonable.

Finding #3: The department has not adequately reduced the State’s MTP costs based on Medi-Cal revenue to the program.

By law, the State and counties must share MTP costs equally, which also requires equal sharing of MTP revenues that reduce those costs and come from sources other than the State or counties, such as the federal portion of Medi-Cal payments. However, the department’s method of reducing state and county MTP costs by the amount of Medi-Cal revenue to the program results in the State paying more than is specifically required under Section 123940. In particular, the State’s costs for the MTP were higher than counties’ cost by more than \$774,000 during fiscal year 2002–03 and more than \$1.4 million in the preceding four fiscal years. In order for the State and counties to share equally in the costs of the MTP, the department needs to reduce the State’s MTP costs by 75 percent of all Medi-Cal payments a county receives during a quarter—that is, the General Fund portion plus half the federal portion of total Medi-Cal payments.

The department contends that Medi-Cal payments should be viewed as a third-party sources of funds to the program when determining state and county shares of MTP costs; that is, the Medi-Cal payments should be deducted from total MTP costs before determining the State and county share of remaining MTP costs. However, doing so results in the State paying more than half the MTP costs, which is not consistent with Section 123940.

We recommended that the department modify its current method for reducing the State’s costs for the MTP to ensure that state costs are reduced by an amount equal to the entire General Fund portion and one-half the federal portion of all Medi-Cal payments made for MTP services.

Department’s Action: Corrective action taken.

On June 3, 2005, the department issued a policy letter informing county California Children’s Services (CCS) programs that the department would revert to its previous methodology for sharing Medi-Cal reimbursements to the MTP between the State and the counties. In accordance with our recommendation, the new policy calls for the department to reduce the State’s MTP costs by the entire General Fund portion and one-half of the federal portion of Medi-Cal payments made for MTP services.

Finding #4: The department did not gather complete data on Medi-Cal payments by county-organized health system (COHS) agencies, resulting in greater costs to the State for the MTP.

Until fiscal year 2003–04, the department did not have a reliable process to collect information on the Medi-Cal payments that COHS agencies make for MTP services. As previously discussed, the department needs this information when it calculates quarterly reimbursements to counties so it can accurately reduce the State’s share of MTP costs based on any Medi-Cal payments the counties receive. Because it did not gather all the information related to Medi-Cal payments made by COHS agencies, the department did not reduce the State’s MTP costs by a total of approximately \$733,000

over the four-year reporting period ending in fiscal year 2002–03, based on data four counties reported to us. The department’s failure to obtain complete data on Medi-Cal payments made by COHS agencies for MTP services was particularly detrimental because the department did not reduce the State’s costs for any portion of these Medi-Cal payments.

Although the department asserted that it did not know of the Medi-Cal payments made by COHS agencies for county MTPs, it reasonably should have. Specifically, each quarter, the department’s Medi-Cal federal fiscal intermediary, Electronic Data Systems Federal Corporation (EDS), sends the department data regarding MTP claims it processed during the quarter and whether the claims were paid or denied. A review of this data could have led the department to question counties about anomalous claims activity. For example, for fiscal year 2002–03, 97 percent and 98 percent of MTP claims submitted to EDS by Santa Barbara and San Mateo counties, respectively, were denied. One of the main reasons these claims were denied was that the patients were enrolled in managed-care plans, and COHS agencies rather than EDS should pay for the services provided to these enrollees. The department asserted that it was the counties’ responsibility to report Medi-Cal payments for MTP services made by COHS agencies; however, without having provided specific instructions requesting the counties to report this data, the department’s expectation is somewhat questionable.

We recommended that the department require COHS agencies to report to the department all Medi-Cal payments they make to counties for MTP services.

Department’s Action: Corrective action taken.

The department indicated that it has issued an instruction letter to each county using a COHS agency, directing them to report these COHS payments on their quarterly expenditure reports to the department.

Finding #5: The department applied an overly broad modification to its claims-processing system that increased Medi-Cal payments for MTP services.

Federal law and state Medi-Cal regulations require that if an individual eligible for Medi-Cal has other health care coverage, such as Medicare or private insurance, providers must bill the other health care insurers before billing Medi-Cal. According to the department, the Medi-Cal claims-processing system is designed to ensure that Medi-Cal is the payer of last resort. However, in March 2004, the department implemented a modification to its Medi-Cal claims-processing system, allowing MTP claims for services to children with other health care coverage to be paid without attempting to bill the other health care insurers first.

The department explained its implementation of this modification based on its interpretation of other federal and state laws. In particular, the department asserts that according to the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, children in special education with therapy identified as a component of an individualized education program are entitled to a “free and appropriate” education. According to

the department, billing the child's other health care insurer could result in the family incurring a cost for the therapy, such as a deductible or copayment charged by a private insurance company. Further, state law provides that children receiving MTP services in public schools are exempt from financial eligibility standards and are not required to pay enrollment fees. The department has interpreted these laws to mean that the MTP is a free program and other health care insurers should not be billed for MTP services because of the possible financial burden to the families.

The department's action was reasonable give the federal law regarding children receiving MTP services as part of a special education program. However, because some children enrolled in the MTP are not in a special education program, the department's action was too broad and is not in compliance with state Medi-Cal and federal Medicaid laws. When asked about obtaining federal approval, the department acknowledged it had not obtained approval to modify the system for MTP, asserting that the federal government had denied a similar request in the past.

We recommended that the department obtain federal approval to allow Medi-Cal to pay for MTP services provided to children who are not in special education without checking for the existence of other health care coverage. Otherwise, the department should modify the current Medi-Cal claims processing system to ensure that other available health care insurers are charged before Medi-Cal pays for MTP services provided to children who are not in special education.

Department's Action: None.

The department does not believe that obtaining the federal approval described in our recommendation is promising because, on issues similar to this, the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has advised the department that it would not review a waiver request from the State because of workload considerations. The department maintains that it would not be productive to develop and submit a waiver request to CMS on this issue since CMS would not consider it. Further, the department states that the Medi-Cal claims processing system has no access to a database that would enable the system to determine whether an individual Medi-Cal beneficiary is covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The department further believes that the costs of developing such a system would exceed any foreseeable benefit experienced by the nominal increase of federal participation.

➔ However, as we state on pages 31 and 32 of the audit report, not all children in the MTP receive special education services. Therefore, the department is improperly allowing Medi-Cal to pay claims for services to MTP children who are not in special education without first determining whether other available health care plans will pay. Lacking the necessary federal approval to implement its current process, the department needs to take the appropriate steps to comply with federal Medicaid requirements. We note that, as of its October 2004 response to us, the department has not indicated whether it intends to modify its current claims-processing system to ensure compliance with federal Medicaid requirements.

Finding #6: Frequency limits imposed by the Medi-Cal claims-processing system are a barrier to increased savings to the State and counties for the MTP.

EDS denied more than 42,500 MTP claims, or 6 percent of MTP claims denied for Medi-Cal payment in the period we reviewed, because the number of therapy services provided exceeded that allowed by the Medi-Cal claims-processing system. State regulations limit how frequently Medi-Cal will pay for some therapy services. However, the department admits that some of the current frequency limits may not be appropriate for the MTP. Generally, counties echo this sentiment, contending that the chronic nature of the medical conditions treated in the MTP necessitate more frequent therapy sessions. Our visits to the counties confirmed that many children in the MTP receive therapy procedures more often than the Medi-Cal claims-processing system permits. Based on data provided by EDS, approximately \$280,000 to \$1.5 million in Medi-Cal claims were denied due to frequency limits from July 2002 through March 2004. When Medi-Cal does not pay claims for MTP services, the State and counties must pay more for the program because they lose the federal funding available under Medi-Cal.

We recommended that the department evaluate whether the current limits Medi-Cal places on the frequency of certain therapy procedures are appropriate for MTP services. If the department determines that the Medi-Cal frequency limits are inappropriate, it should seek approval to modify these limits accordingly.

Department's Action: Pending.

The department agrees that frequency limits on occupational and physical therapy services in the claims payment system should be reevaluated. However, the department views this as a resource intensive activity. In lieu of this, the department is considering evaluating the appropriateness of authorizing these procedures as Early and Periodic, Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment (EPSDT) Supplemental Services and, if deemed appropriate, will implement them. This would override frequency limitations for therapy services provided to CCS clients.

Finding #7: Los Angeles County does not have a process to follow up on individual MTP claims denied for Medi-Cal payment.

Los Angeles County provided services to approximately 29 percent of the MTP caseload statewide according to caseload data counties reported for fiscal year 2002–03. In contrast to the other three counties we visited, Los Angeles does not follow up on individual denied claims. As a result, it may have missed out on \$58,000 to \$307,000 in Medi-Cal payments from July 2002 through March 2004 because it did not attempt to resolve and resubmit roughly 8,800 MTP claims denied for potentially correctable or preventable errors. For example, 89 percent of the county's denied claims were the result of missing documentation or invalid data on the claim form. The director of the Los Angeles County MTP said that the county assumed responsibility for billing MTP services and discontinued using a billing service in 2001. She also indicated that the county decided at the time not

to resubmit individual denied MTP claims because the county did not have the required knowledgeable staff to follow up on the claims. In addition, the director told us that the county is currently considering the cost-effectiveness of reviewing and resubmitting denied claims.

To maximize Medi-Cal payments for MTP services, we recommended that Los Angeles County and any other counties that do not review MTP claims denied for Medi-Cal payment should attempt to correct and resubmit denied MTP claims when it is cost-effective to do so.

Los Angeles County's Action: Corrective action taken.

Los Angeles County agreed with our recommendation and has assessed the cost-effectiveness of resubmitting previously denied claims that are deemed correctable. Los Angeles County indicates that the electronic resubmission of denied Medi-Cal claims provides additional net revenue to the county and is cost-effective. Therefore, the county will resubmit corrected versions of previously denied claims on an ongoing basis following each quarterly billing cycle.