

An MCO recommends that you observe specific practice guidelines

Ms. Remo was seen by her physician, Dr. Hilton, for complaints of severe low back pain. A 35-year-old nurse, Ms. Remo thought she injured her back lifting a heavy patient and asked if an X-ray would be ordered. Dr. Hilton had ordered radiology studies for back pain in the past, but new guidelines on low back pain management do not call for X-rays in cases like Ms. Reno's.

Patient-specific circumstances may mean that reasonable general recommendations may occasionally be inappropriate. You have the individual freedom to exercise your own medical judgment when in the best interests of a patient. In the event you decide to deviate from a practice guideline, note the medical rationale and reasons justifying any deviation in the medical record.

You may be required by one or more MCOs to follow specific practice guidelines and protocols in the management of a variety of medical conditions. Guidelines, along with case management in disease management, have been adopted by many MCOs to reduce variation in practice patterns and to improve patient outcomes. At the same time, you need to clearly communicate your treatment decisions and underlying rationale to patients who may have a different expectation.

To achieve compliance with MCO guidelines, physicians are sent a clinical profile by the MCO comparing them with their peers, with the goal of measuring compliance with practice standards that are well established in the medical community. Some plans exert pressure to comply through peer review or termination from the plan.

Finally, guidelines are meant to guide—not dictate. When evaluating guidelines, examine the source. For example, are the guidelines derived from a government source such as the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute or are they privately created? Is the rationale that drives the guidelines primarily medical or are economic factors playing too strong a role?

