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**OFFICE OF THE
NEW YORK STATE COMPTROLLER**

**DIVISION OF STATE
GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY**

UNITED HEALTHCARE

**NEW YORK STATE
HEALTH INSURANCE
PROGRAM -
OVERPAYMENTS FOR
SERVICES AT THE EYE
SURGERY CENTER OF
WESTCHESTER**

Report 2008-S-30

AUDIT OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to determine whether the Eye Surgery Center of Westchester (Eye Surgery of Westchester) routinely waived Empire Plan members' out-of-pocket costs, and if so, to quantify the overpayments made by United HealthCare (United) resulting from this practice. Our audit covered the period January 1, 2001 through November 30, 2007.

AUDIT RESULTS - SUMMARY

We found that Eye Surgery of Westchester routinely waived Empire Plan members' required out-of-pocket costs for services provided. We calculated that, as a result of this practice, United overpaid claims submitted during our audit period at a cost of \$104,202 to the State. This practice further drives up costs for the Empire Plan since it increases the likelihood that members will use non-participating providers, such as Eye Surgery of Westchester, which generally receive higher reimbursement rates than participating providers. Furthermore, routinely waiving such costs is a billing practice that may violate the State Insurance Law.

We are referring this matter to the New York State Department of Civil Service for appropriate action. In addition, our report contains two recommendations for United to recover overpayments from Eye Surgery of Westchester and to prevent Eye Surgery of Westchester from waiving patients' out-of-pocket costs.

This report, dated September 30, 2008, is available on our website at: <http://www.osc.state.ny.us>. Add or update your mailing list address by contacting us at: (518) 474-3271 or
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Division of State Government Accountability
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BACKGROUND

The New York State Health Insurance Program (Program) provides health insurance coverage to active and retired State, participating local government and school district employees and their dependents. The Empire Plan is the primary health benefits plan for the Program. The New York State Department of Civil Service (Department) contracts with United to process and pay medical claims for services provided to Empire Plan members. The State reimburses United for the payments it makes under the Empire Plan and pays United an administrative fee.

United contracts with providers to furnish medical services to Empire Plan members and who agree to accept reimbursement at rates established by United. United pays these participating providers directly based on claims they submit for services rendered to members. Members pay a nominal co-payment to the participating provider.

Members may choose to receive services from non-participating providers. The claims submitted to United by non-participating providers for any given service usually reflect rates that are higher than the rates that participating providers agree to accept for the same service. To limit its liability, United will only pay non-participating provider claims based on the lesser of reasonable and customary costs for services or the amount claimed.

As a disincentive, the Empire Plan requires members to pay higher out-of-pocket costs (including a deductible and a co-insurance rate) when they use non-participating providers. After the member meets the annual deductible, United will reimburse the member 80 percent of the reasonable and customary cost. The member is responsible for compensating the non-participating provider, including any out-of-pocket costs owed.

Participating providers agree to accept reimbursement rates that are generally lower than the rates for non-participating providers because there are several advantages. For example, Empire Plan members are encouraged to use participating providers to avoid paying the higher out-of-pocket costs. In addition, United directly reimburses participating providers, thereby eliminating any problems resulting from collecting payments from various patients.

Our audit focused on claims submitted by the Eye Surgery Center of Westchester, a surgical facility located at Pelhamdale Ave, New Rochelle, NY. Eye Surgery of Westchester does not participate as a provider in the Empire Plan. United's reimbursement for services provided at Eye Surgery of Westchester, consists of the facility fee for the use of Eye Surgery of Westchester's facility, personnel and equipment. During the period

January 1, 2001 through November 30, 2007, United paid Eye Surgery of Westchester claims totaling \$718,369 for Empire Plan members.

AUDIT FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When United processes Eye Surgery of Westchester claims for services to Empire Plan members, it is with the understanding and belief that members are liable for a portion of the claimed amount representing their out-of-pocket obligation. Our audit found that Eye Surgery of Westchester is routinely waiving Empire Plan members' out-of-pocket obligations. This negates the intended disincentive from using the more costly non-participating providers and thus drives up the cost of the Empire Plan to taxpayers.

As Eye Surgery of Westchester's intention was to waive members' out-of-pocket costs, the amount claimed by Eye Surgery of Westchester should reflect this reduction and the reimbursement by United should have been calculated on the lower amount. However, United was presented with and made reimbursement calculations based on inflated claims. We calculated that, as a result, United overpaid claims submitted by Eye Surgery of Westchester during our audit period at a cost of \$104,202 to the State.

To determine the overpayment, we selected medical claims submitted by Eye Surgery of Westchester where United was the primary payer and where members' out-of-pocket costs were included on the claim. For the period January 1, 2001 through November 31, 2007, we identified 274 billings totaling \$591,111 meeting these criteria. To determine whether Eye Surgery of Westchester waived members' out-of-pocket costs, we reviewed a sample of 198

randomly-selected billings from the 274 billings and evaluated the results using statistical methods. We then reviewed Eye Surgery of Westchester's financial records and found that the members' out-of-pocket costs were waived for 140 of the 198 sampled bills. For the remaining 58 bills, Eye Surgery of Westchester did not waive the member's out-of-pocket costs.

From our random sample, we calculated an overpayment of \$66,516, due to the fact that the bills were inflated. Eye Surgery of Westchester reported the entire billed amount, without reducing the claim for the amount of the waived members' out-of-pocket costs. A projection of these audit overpayments to the entire population, using statistical sampling methods and a 95 percent single-sided confidence level, results in an audit overpayment of \$104,202.

Additionally, under the New York Penal Law, submitting an insurance claim with false information, such as an inflated charge for service, may constitute insurance fraud. In addition, waiving of out-of-pocket costs unjustly enriches the provider because the payment should be based on the provider's actual charge, which is the amount the provider intends to accept as payment. Finally, the New York State Insurance Department concluded that it may be a violation of the State Insurance Law, and a fraudulent billing practice, when a provider routinely waives out-of-pocket costs and accepts the amount the insurer reimburses as payment in full.

Officials at the Department of Civil Service and the State Insurance Department are concerned about fraud in the Empire Plan. Officials are concerned that providers who waive Empire Plan members' out-of-pocket costs are doing so intentionally, in order to

benefit from the higher reimbursement rates for non-participating providers.

Recommendations

1. Recover from Eye Surgery of Westchester the \$104,202 overpaid for services provided to Empire Plan members.
2. Work with the Department of Civil Service to pursue an appropriate course of action designed to prevent Eye Surgery of Westchester from waiving out-of-pocket costs.

AUDIT SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

We conducted our performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Our audit primarily focused on identifying overpayments from claims submitted by the Eye Surgery Center of Westchester to United during the period January 1, 2001 through November 30, 2007 where there was a risk of Eye Surgery of Westchester waiving members' out-of-pocket costs.

To accomplish our objectives, we reviewed a random sample of 198 billings submitted by Eye Surgery of Westchester. We met with officials from Eye Surgery of Westchester and reviewed financial records to determine if Eye Surgery of Westchester was waiving the Empire Plan members' out-of-pocket costs.

In addition to being the State Auditor, the Comptroller performs certain other constitutionally and statutorily mandated duties as the chief fiscal officer of New York State. These include operating the State's accounting systems; preparing the State's financial statements; and approving State contracts, refunds, and other payments. In addition, the Comptroller appoints members

to certain boards, commissions, and public authorities, some of whom have minority voting rights. These duties may be considered management functions for purposes of evaluating organizational independence under generally accepted government auditing standards. In our opinion, these management functions do not affect our ability to conduct independent audits of program performance.

AUTHORITY

The audit was performed pursuant to the State Comptroller's authority as set forth in Article V, Section 1 of the State Constitution and Article II, Section 8 of the State Finance Law.

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

We provided preliminary copies of the matters contained in this report to United officials for their review and comments. United officials agree with our audit findings and conclusions.

Within 90 days of the final release of this report, we request that the President of United HealthCare report to the State Comptroller advising what steps were taken to implement the recommendations.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THE REPORT

Major contributors to this report were Kenneth Shulman, David Fleming, Laura Brown, Brian Krawiecki, and Arnold Blanck.