

Medicare Expands Coverage for Lifesaving Obesity Surgery

Private Insurers Expected to Follow Suit

GAINESVILLE, Fla., Feb. 21 /PRNewswire/ -- After an extensive review of medical evidence that lasted nearly a year, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) announced today it will establish a national coverage policy for bariatric surgery to help reduce the significant health risks, including death and disability, associated with obesity. This new policy will apply to all Medicare recipients including those over 65 and Medicare disabled who are morbidly obese (body mass index or BMI of 35 or greater) with any obesity related condition or disease and have been previously unsuccessful with the medical treatment of obesity. The American Society for Bariatric Surgery (ASBS), the largest organization of bariatric surgeons in the world, submitted the request for a national coverage determination (NCD) last May.

"This is a great day in the war against obesity. We expect many private insurers will take their lead from CMS and improve outdated coverage policies that severely restrict or even ban the use of bariatric surgery. This decision and the data that supports it are overwhelming," said Neil Hutcher, MD, President, ASBS. "Obesity is a disease and for many, bariatric surgery is the best treatment. More patients will now have access to a surgery that can prevent, improve, or cure a number of life-threatening obesity related conditions including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, sleep apnea and cirrhosis of the liver."

Morbid obesity continues to be a growing problem in the U.S. affecting between 8 and 12 million people. The number of people who are morbidly obese is growing at double the rate of the rest of the obese population. In 2005, about 170,000 people had bariatric surgery. www.asbs.org www.surgicalreview.org