



October 24, 2005

Social Security Administration
Office of Disability and Income Security Programs
Office of Regulations
100 Altmeyer Building
6401 Security Blvd.
Baltimore, Maryland 21235-6401

File Code: RIN 0960-AG31

To Whom It May Concern:

On behalf of **NATCO**, *The Organization for Transplant Professionals* (NATCO), we want to thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Social Security Administration Proposed Rule regarding the Administrative Review Process for Adjudicating Initial Disability Claims. NATCO is a not-for-profit professional organization comprised of nearly 2,000 transplant and organ procurement clinicians who are dedicated to a better quality of life for patients with end-stage organ failure...and a respect for those who shared the gift of life.

It was recently brought to our attention that the Social Security Administration (SSA) is seeking to “amend its review process for Social Security benefit claims based on disability and for applications for SSI payments based on disability or blindness in order to improve the accuracy, consistency, and timeliness of decision making throughout the disability determination process.”

NATCO would like to indicate its support for the SSA proposal for expediting the disability determination process for persons deemed ‘clearly disabled.’ Changes that will ensure more timely disability determination outcomes for people with urgent health care needs – such as patients with end stage organ disease awaiting organ transplants – are desperately needed in order to more quickly qualify these individuals for Medicare coverage.

Patients with organ failure face tremendous hardship as they await an organ transplant. A typical patient awaiting transplant who is disabled needs to wait to qualify for Medicare and have their costly medical expenses paid for. Many patients with organ failure are unable to work and cannot afford to pay for private health coverage. The complications they face related to a chronic illness are associated with financial hardship. The often-complicated nature of the disability determination process – as well as the mandated waiting period to qualify for Medicare – is stressful for patients at an already vulnerable period in their lives.

NATCO supports the establishment of Quick Disability Determination units in State agencies, improved electronic filing methods, and the 20-day determination deadlines proposed for beneficiaries deemed ‘clearly disabled.’ It is our belief that these steps will lead to a more streamlined approach for those filing for disability.

NATCO suggests that SSA consider implementing a category-specific determination as a demonstration project, in lieu of region-by-region phase-in of expedited determinations, as suggested in the proposed rule. We would suggest that one such category be those patients awaiting organ transplants who are listed on the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network (OPTN) waiting list. This categorization would limit the size and scope of the pool of determinations, require a much smaller federal expert panel be in place initially, and allow determinations to occur on a national basis, which would facilitate outcome comparisons on a state-by-state – a process that will undoubtedly increase accuracy and allow for greater consistency across the program. The OPTN has established eligibility criteria for each organ so much of the groundwork for this expedited process is already in place. We would be happy to explore this further as the Agency moves forward toward the development of the final rule.

Transplant coordinators are the first line of contact with patients awaiting transplants. We work with patients to provide the necessary assistance throughout the transplant process – and for years post transplant. We are the first to call a patient to let them know a life-saving organ is available, and we see the daily struggle patient face trying to figure out how they will pay for medical treatment and immunosuppressive drugs needed to prevent organ rejection. It is for these reasons, that NATCO supports initiatives that will ensure that patients with end stage organ failure awaiting organ transplants can receive a disability determination and qualify for Medicare coverage as expeditiously as possible.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments. Should you have any questions regarding the points raised, please do not hesitate to contact Amy Demske, our Washington Representative at (202) 857-6484.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Charlie Alexander". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Charlie Alexander
President