What These Findings Mean

This analysis highlights the influence that referring physicians have over where patients receive care. Rather than price shopping for lower-limb MRI scans, patients appear to receive care at the usual locations to which their physician traditionally refers patients. This key finding underscores how important physician advice is to patient decision-making. In lieu of increasing patient cost sharing or relying on price transparency tools, payers and policymakers should consider targeting referring physicians with information and incentives that encourage them to steer patients to more efficient, high-quality providers. The weight patients place on the advice of referring physicians also highlights the potential for hospital acquisition of physician groups to drive more patients to expensive hospital-based imaging centers.

More About This Study

This study used 2013 claims from a national private health insurer to examine prices and use of lower-limb MRIs. An online routing application was used to identify all MRI providers within specified drive times from each patient’s home. Each provider’s MRI price was computed as the average of its transaction prices, then this price was divided into the portions that would have been paid by the patient and the insurer. The price differences between the MRI provider actually used and the lowest-price MRI provider within the given drive time were what each party could have saved if the lower-priced option had been used. ANOVA and multivariate regressions identified factors influencing where patients receive care.

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