For individuals with a weakened heart or heart failure, cardiologists often recommend a ventricular assist device (VAD), while awaiting a heart transplant or as a long-term treatment. While it can be an essential, life-saving option, this small device comes with a large price tag. Between 2009 and 2014, the average billed charges for the implantation and first-year maintenance of a VAD were $1.2 million with each succeeding year billing up to $500,000 in post-implantation charges.1

Organizations covering the cost of VAD procedures and post-implant device maintenance face high and dynamically changing expenses.2 However, with our ventricular assist device program, Optum can help control cost variation and ensure individuals get the right care.

What is a VAD?

It is a mechanical pump that helps pump blood from ventricles — the lower chambers of the heart — to the body, just as a healthy heart does. It does not replace the heart. Rather, a VAD helps it function. VADs may be used as a short-term solution for patients awaiting a heart transplant. This is known as “bridge to transplant” (BTT). Or it may be a long-term treatment for those who are not candidates for a transplant, which is referred to as “destination therapy” (DT). In rare circumstances, a heart may recover after being supported by a VAD, known as “bridge to recovery.”

Increasing VAD utilization trends

The number of annual VAD procedures is projected to have increased 33 percent between 2011 and 2015 with the majority of growth now being driven by destination therapy.

1 Names and photos used with permission of HeartWare International, Inc and Thoratec Corporation, respectively.
Ventricular assist device program

Since VAD implantation procedures are relatively infrequent, very few facilities capture enough volume to develop the expertise and experience required to consistently deliver superior outcomes. So it is important to work with partners that identify and qualify hospitals that perform VAD procedures. The Optum® VAD program identifies and qualifies leading VAD centers — 60 nationwide — and provides access to quality providers for VAD implantation as well as post-surgical maintenance.

Our VAD program has developed an innovative solution that focuses on superior management and improves outcomes by:

- Identifying, qualifying and contracting with a broad VAD network
- Controlling cost variation and mitigating financial risk through utilization of and emphasis on strategic contracting VAD network facilities and VAD equipment vendors

The ventricular assist device program is available to all individuals who have our Transplant Resource Services product.

Preferred VAD vendors

Post-implant VAD charges are a major cost driver for VAD care — mainly due to vendor rates for VAD equipment and supplies. Additional costs are incurred through complications, follow-up medical services and medications. To minimize cost variation and secure the best rates for our clients, we partner with preferred VAD vendors.

Our clients typically save $69,000 in equipment maintenance and supply costs in an average year by choosing our preferred VAD vendors rather than other vendors. The VAD program enables our clients to access our preferred vendor contracts regardless of the facility performing the member’s VAD implant.

The VAD program is a comprehensive solution that spans the continuum of VAD care. First, we provide clients network access that yields 45–50 percent average savings on billed charges from Optum VAD network centers. Second, we protect clients from high durable medical equipment (DME) costs. And third, we provide support for coordinating the multiple steps in caring for VAD patients.

Sources:
5. Chen M. VAD contract comparison tool of Optum contract commercial cases, hospital only; 2012–2014.