

notation: "(Called on 01/03/05) Monday . . . Send Letter – Recommended 'approval' as of yesterday." AR p. 437. Other notations refer to appointment of a representative from the hospital and deductible amounts.²⁹

The Plan acknowledged receipt of the grievance by letter dated July 19, 2005. As before, this letter asserts that "individuals with no prior involvement in your case will make a decision on your grievance." AR p. 402.

August 2005. A Grievance Summary Sheet dated August 10, 2005 sets forth the information provided to the Grievance Committee and summarizes its decision. AR p. 392. The latter consists of the following handwritten note: "Unanimous vote to uphold the denial of benefits for the LVAD procedure /surgery as an exclusion of coverage per the COC Section 2, What's Not Covered – Exclusions, Experimental, Investigational, or Unproven Services."

The history of the claim provided on this form indicates that the first-level grievance was upheld as experimental/investigational but that a "peer reviewer overturned denial, stating LVAD was not experimental for destination therapy." A very short history of the patient's treatment is included, covering her transfer from MUSC to Duke for a transplant evaluation. This summary then states "on 10/11/04, member had placement of LVAD to bridge until member received heart transplant." However, it then states that the Plan was advised on October 13 that Mrs. Whitley "was not on the transplant list, that she was to have the LVAD for the remainder of her life." The summary then states: "HR nurse discussed w/ Dr. Hutt and ran HAYES report since LVAD was placed for destination

²⁹ While no firm conclusion can be drawn from these notes, it appears possible that what Mr. Whitley recalls is a conversation with a Duke representative, who may have been reporting on their own conversation with the Plan on January 3, 2005. His recollection as stated in the letter, however, is more consistent with a conversation with a Plan representative. The failure of the Plan to address the identity of the other participant in the January 3, 2005 call makes either alternative a possibility.

instead of as a bridge. At time of service, HAYES rating of "C" for destination and "A for bridge to transplant and "B" as bridge to recovery."

The other materials provided, according to this sheet, included: (1) member/provider grievance letter; (2) customer/provider service notes; (3) reason for original determination; (4) authorization/notification notes; (5) certification of coverage; (6) claim/claim history; and (7) medical records. AR p. 392. Although there is a block for "other" there is no indication of any additional materials. What specific materials were provided is not apparent from these documents. Thus, it is unclear whether this grievance panel was provided with: the HAYES Report and Alert; the HAYES Update listing sixty-two more recent studies and articles; the URN-Review; or, most critically the Peer Review. There is certainly no evidence that they considered any of these materials even if they were provided.³⁰

A "Special Notation" in what appears to be a computer record of this grievance states: "The committee requested Dr. Hutt, Medical Director and Belinda Cox, VP of Medical Affairs be present to address question regarding the HAYES Rating criteria. Due to their prior involvement in the case, they departed prior to the committee vote." AR p. 393. What information was provided by Dr. Hutt and Cox is not disclosed.

On August 15, 2005, the Plan wrote Mr. Whitley advising that his grievance had been denied as to all charges from October 9, 2004 forward.³¹ AR p. 389. The one page letter is quite cursory, and relies only on the following denial reason: "the LVAD is considered experimental, investigational

³⁰ The cursory denial letter does not even refer to the HAYES Rating. *See infra* p. 34.

³¹ The period selected for denial (October 9 forward) is based on the date that Dr. Milano indicated his intent to place the LVAD "for destination therapy," not the date the surgery was performed: October 11, 2004. There is no suggestion that Mrs. Whitley would, but for the planned surgery, have been able to leave the hospital as of October 9, 2004.

or unproven, it is an exclusion of your policy and is therefore not a covered service.” AR p. 389. As in the letter denying the first-level grievance, this letter quotes the Experimental Exclusion, but not the relevant defining terms. Notice is not mentioned as a denial reason.

The letter makes no reference to HAYES, the HAYES Report, or any other evidence of the status of LVAD therapy. There is, moreover, no reference to any distinction between “destination” and “bridge” usage of the LVAD. Indeed, the letter suggests that LVAD is experimental for all purposes.

The remainder of the letter advises Mr. Whitley of his right to seek copies of documents and criteria relied on by the Plan. It also advises him of his right to file a third-level grievance. AR p. 389 (signed by Dee Goodman, Grievance Coordinator).

August 19, 2005. Prior to receiving this denial, Mr. Whitley apparently mailed an August 19, 2005 letter stating that he has been granted additional time to “submit data in response to the July 19, 2005 letter regarding my grievance” AR p. 399. There is no evidence to suggest that this statement was untrue.

Mr. Whitley’s letter refers to various enclosed documents, although they are not specifically listed. AR pp 399-401. He also states that the Plan booklet in effect at the time of Mrs. Whitley’s surgery relied on Medicaid and Medicare Rating Criteria, not on HAYES. AR p. 400 (noting July 2005 modification of handbook to rely on HAYES).³²

³² The actual change in the Plan documents appears to be reflected on AR p. 425-26 which adds to the Experimental Exclusion the statement that the status of a procedure would be determined “by the HAYES Rating criteria or other approved new technology and treatment criteria tool.” AR p. 426. In addition, the following is added to the definitions, as an additional ground on which a treatment may be found to be experimental: “Rated with a C or lesser rating by the Hayes Rating System or other approved new technology and treatment criteria tool.” AR p. 427.

It appears that several pages of the National Coverage Determinations Manual were included with the above letter. AR 405-09 (marked as "C1-C5"). This document, which addresses approval of procedures for Medicare purposes, indicates that LVADs were approved for destination purposes "for services performed on or after October 1, 2003." Pages printed out from the internet also discuss "HeartMate Destination Therapy by Thoratec." AR pp. 410-11 (this appears to be a promotional piece written by the manufacturer and consists mostly of anecdotal reports of success from participants in the REMATCH study). Similar pages discuss the HeartMate IP. AR pp. 412-13.

An abstract from a 2001 edition of the New England Journal of Medicine is also included which expressly addresses "Long-Term Use of a Left Ventricular Assist Device for End-Stage Heart Failure." AR pp. 415-16. This article discusses the REMATCH study which included 20 centers and 129 patients "with end-stage heart failure ineligible for cardiac transplantation" who were randomly selected to receive either a HeartMate LVAD or optimal medical therapy. Although the LVAD group had more adverse events, they reported a 52% survival rate at one year, versus 25% for the control group. At two years, the LVAD group had a 23% survival rate, versus 7% for the control group. Based on the above the "authors conclude[d] that the LVAD is an acceptable alternative therapy in advanced heart-failure patients ineligible for cardiac transplantation."

Another significant report which appears to have been included with this letter is a December 2002 report from the Columbia University Health Sciences journal "InVivo," which reported that the FDA had approved LVADs for "patients who are terminally ill but not eligible for a heart transplant because of age or other serious medical problems." AR pp. 417-418. This approval apparently was given in November 2002. See AR pp. 419-23 at 419 & 422 ("HeartMate Destination Therapy" report from Thoratec Corporation website reporting same).

Third-level Grievance

August 23, 2005 - October 28, 2005. A "Grievance Checklist" was completed in late August 2005, indicating that the above letter would be treated as a third-level grievance, rather than as a basis to reopen the second-level grievance. See AR 530 ("Grievance Checklist" completed by "Dee G" and referring to grievance received August 23, 2005).³³ A handwritten notation on the Grievance Checklist reads as follows "Jim- see me or call me when you get back to your desk about this."

On the day after this form was prepared, Barbara Excell sent an email to James Zupon (addressing him as "Jim") which states:

Just wanted to provide the following information to you from Dr. Hutt on the Carol Whitley case as second level is the next step. CCP did not authorize the LVAD. CCP was informed of and authorized a complicated CABG by Duke that MUSC was hesitant to perform and CCP authorized a consult/evaluation for the potential transplant. Duke performed a right heart prophylactic CABG and a LVAD that CCP did not authorize or even know about until after the procedure. CCP did not and do[es] not use FDA or Medicare guidelines for authorization and CCP has a track record of using Hayes for several years. CCP has sent the updated Hayes criteria on LVADs to Mr. Whitley per his request. Please let me know if you have any questions.

AR p. 675 (emphasis added).³⁴

On September 20, 2005, the Plan wrote to the Whitleys and their counsel, indicating the date and time of the grievance hearing (October 25, 2005 at 1:00 p.m.). AR p. 535. No evidence is provided as to whether the Whitleys attended the hearing.

³³ There is no indication that the Plan questioned Mr. Whitley's claim that he had been granted additional time to provide support for his second-level appeal. Neither is there any evidence that Mr. Whitley's claim was untrue.

³⁴ The reference to second-level is incorrect. As noted above, the Plan elected to treat Mr. Whitley's August 19, 2005 letter as invocation of his rights to a third-level grievance.

An October 21, 2005 memorandum from Dee Goodman to Karen Phillips, Teresa [Brooks], and Patricia Ortiz, provides detailed pre-hearing information.³⁵ AR pp. 539-40 (these three individuals appear to constitute the panel, although only two of them signed the hearing summary discussed below). This memorandum explains that the LVAD claim was denied at the first-level grievance because “Dr. Hutt reviewed and determined that services were experimental/investigation based on a HAYES rating of ‘C.’” It also states that a second-level grievance was upheld, but gives no further reason or grounds. The first paragraph then concludes: “This is an issue of benefits. The panel should focus on this issue and this issue alone.” Notably, there is no mention of notice as a denial reason.

The memorandum then explains the duties of the panel “to listen and fully understand the reasons for the hearing, and then make a fair and proper decision.” It also states that the decision is to be “independent of all previous decisions.” Nonetheless, Goodman (who had been involved in earlier stages of review) states that she will act as “moderator/facilitator,” “will make introductions and guide the discussion,” and will “prepare the required written response.”

An attached summary briefly describes Mrs. Whitley’s treatment history, beginning with her hospitalization at MUSC and transfer to Duke for possible transplant. AR p. 540. This summary states that the Plan received a call on October 13, 2004 indicating that the LVAD had been placed for destination therapy which prompted “HR [to run] a HAYES report since the LVAD was placed for destination *rather than as a bridge for transplant as originally planned.*” AR p. 540 (emphasis added). Because this revealed a “HAYES rating of ‘C,’ the *LVAD for destination was considered*

³⁵ The record does not appear to contain any similar detailed memorandum for either of the earlier grievances. Neither is there any indication that the Whitleys were invited to attend and be heard at the second-level grievance, although Dr. Hutt and another Plan representative were asked to provide oral explanations of the Plan’s position.

experimental/investigational.” Id. (emphasis added).

The summary discloses that the November 3, 2004 URN-Specialized Physician Review concluded that continuing Mrs. Whitley on “LVAD destination therapy [was] is the most prudent [plan at that time],” acknowledging that with weight loss and control of her diabetes, she might become a transplant candidate. It then states that Dr. Hutt advised Duke’s representative that the services would not be covered as experimental on the following day.

As to the earlier grievances, the summary acknowledges that because the Plan originally logged the matter in as a “medical grievance,” it was forwarded for peer review, with that reviewer finding the LVAD not to be investigational. The summary then discounts this review as follows: “However, it was later determined that the grievance was a benefit issue and not a medical issue.”

AR p. 540. The results of the various grievances were summarized as follows:

- the Plan’s decision on the provider’s first-level grievance was upheld by the Grievance Coordinator based on the HAYES rating of “C” indicating the procedure was experimental/investigational;
- the member’s first-level grievance was upheld on the same basis;
- the member’s second-level grievance was upheld because the procedure was experimental/investigational or unproven (no basis stated).

See AR p. 540 (paraphrased above). As in the earlier sections of this memorandum, this listing contains no mention of a notice-based denial reason.

There appear to have been three exhibits attached to the memorandum.³⁶ Two are duplicates of the same letter: the Plan’s October 19, 2004 letter to Dr. Milano (initial denial letter relying solely

³⁶ All three follow the memorandum in the record and are preceded by exhibit cover pages.

on Experimental Exclusion). The third is a copy of the Plan's December 28, 2004 letter to Mr. Whitley acknowledging receipt of his first-level grievance. This copy bears Mr. Whitley's handwritten notations regarding a call made in early January 2005 (before denial of the first-level grievance).

It is not clear from the record whether any additional documents were provided to the panel which made the final decision.³⁷ What inferences might be drawn from the physical arrangement of the administrative record suggest that, at most, only a handful of documents supporting the Whitleys' position might have been provided to the panel and that those were not drawn to the panel's attention in any meaningful way.³⁸ The physical arrangement of the record also suggests that the grievance panel may not have had the critical HAYES documents.³⁹

³⁷ No index or records custodian affidavit is provided from which the court might discern what pages were provided to this grievance panel. As noted above, only a few pages are marked in a way which suggests they were provided as exhibits.

³⁸ One must search the record for over 100 pages before finding any documents which state or support the Whitley's position. What supportive documents do appear in subsequent pages of the record include: (1) Mr. Whitley's July 15, 2005 grievance letter (AR pp. 658-67); (2) Duke's November 22, 2004 letter challenging the denial and explaining what notice and approval was given (AR pp. 671-72); a faxed copy of the peer review determination adverse to the plan (AR pp. 676-79); Mr. Whitley's December 22, 2004 letter (AR pp. 680-82); Duke's faxed "To Whom It May Concern" letter and attached records requesting provisional approval for a heart transplant (AR pp. 699-717); and an incomplete inclusion of the pages which were apparently provided as attachments to Mr. Whitley's August 19, 2005 letter (AR pp. 733-750).

³⁹ None of the relevant HAYES documents (HAYES Report, HAYES Alert, and HAYES Update) appear at *any* point following the memorandum to the grievance panel. The HAYES Report contains the rating on which the Plan relied in denying the claim but also reveals that the Report was nineteen to twenty months old at the time of Mrs. Whitley's surgery. The HAYES Update casts doubt on the continued validity of the HAYES Report, given the extensive listing of more recent articles and warning that the results of the search would result in HAYES reexamination of the status of the procedure.

While a copy of the Peer Review report does appear in the subsequent pages of the administrative record, the court is unable to determine whether it was provided to the third-level grievance panel. *See* AR pp. 676-79 (Peer Review appearing over 100 pages after summary to panel). Further, to the extent this document was drawn to the panel's attention, it was in explaining why the Peer Review report should be disregarded (for the curious reason that the Plan obtained this report based on a mistaken treatment of the grievance as a medical rather than a benefits issue).⁴⁰

As noted above, the memorandum to the panel does mention the URN-Specialized Physician Review. As with the Peer Review, this mention was in the context of discounting the Review's relevance. Unlike the Peer Review, this document does not appear in subsequent pages of the record, suggesting that it may not have been made available for them to draw their own conclusions.

The record also contains a Grievance Hearing Summary Sheet⁴¹ (presumably provided to the third-level grievance panel). This summary restates the grievance issue in a manner similar to the way the issue was stated in the August (second-level) Summary Sheet, although it is modified to indicate that two prior grievances were upheld (both based on the Experimental Exclusion and HAYES rating of "C"). AR p. 536. The summary then explains:

The Peer Reviewer determined that the LVAD was not experimental. However, it was later determined that the grievance was a benefit issue and not medical. HR

⁴⁰ The distinction between a medical and a benefits issue is not explained. It would not, however, appear to a medical necessity determination as the peer reviewer was expressly asked to address whether the placement of the LVAD for destination therapy would fall within the Plan's Experimental Exclusion. In any case, no explanation is offered for why the distinction would justify ignoring a peer review obtained by and on behalf of the Plan itself.

⁴¹ This summary is in addition to the more detailed memorandum discussed above. As noted above, a similar short summary sheet was prepared for the second-level grievance. There is no indication whether Mr. Whitley was provided with a copy of the memorandum prepared for the third-level grievance or the summary sheets prepared for both the second and third-level grievances.

notes indicate that member had transplant evaluation done and was to receive LVAD as bridge. However, HR was later notified that the LVAD was for destination; that she would have the LVAD for the remainder of her life. HAYES report rating was "C" for destination and "A for bridge to transplant and "B" for bridge to recovery.

AR p. 536. In addition to the type of materials listed previously, this form indicates that "other" materials are also provided. As noted above, however, it is impossible to discern from the record what materials were provided to or reviewed by this or the earlier grievance panel.

According to notes written on the summary sheet, the Panel voted to disallow the claim based on both a failure of notice and the Experimental Exclusion: "Prior auth was requested for CABG, not LVAD. LVAD is considered experimental for use as a permanent destination therapy. Therefore is an exclusion of certificate. Cert does not cover experimental/investigational." AR p. 536.

On October 26, 2005. Teresa Brooks (a member of the third-level grievance panel) emailed James Zupon, with copies to the other two panel members (Karen Phillips and Patricia Ortiz), stating that the hearing was conducted at 1:00 p.m. on October 25, 2005, and that the hearing committee met the following day to discuss the case. Brooks states that they "reviewed all documents provided and took into consideration the discussion at the hearing" and then voted to deny the claim based on: (1) a lack of prior authorization for the LVAD (stating that the records mention only CABG); and (2) evidence that LVAD was solely for destination. As to the latter, she states: "Since the LVAD was for destination, HAYES indicates a 'C Rating' which states experimental. According to the CCP certificate . . . this is an exclusion to the member's benefit." AR p. 538.⁴²

⁴² This email and the above quoted notes do not distinguish between *notice* of LVAD for bridge and *notice* of LVAD for destination purposes. Rather, the assumption seems to be that there is no evidence that LVAD was approved for any purpose and that the only approval was for CABG. The notes provided to the third-level grievance panel, however, suggest that LVAD *was* approved as a bridge to transplant. Moreover, the denial of the second-level grievance did not rest on a lack of notice.

On October 28, 2005, Dee Goodman, on behalf of the Plan, wrote Mr. Whitley advising him of the Plan's denial of his "third-level grievance." She states:

Our Hearing Review Panel has carefully reviewed your grievance and all supporting documentation and has determined that we correctly processed your claims in accordance with your Certificate of Coverage.

The Panel's decision was based on the following:

Carolina Care Plan utilizes the HAYES rating system and HAYES rated the LVAD experimental/investigational for use as a permanent destination therapy. Since the LVAD was considered experimental, investigational or unproven on the date of Ms. Whitley's surgery, the Panel determined it is an exclusion of the member's Certificate of Co[verage] and is therefore not a covered service.

AR p. 532. The letter then quotes the exclusion for Experimental, Investigational or Unproven Services. The letter also states that the "*notification protocol* was not followed" as the Plan's records do not reflect notice of Duke's plan to implant an LVAD until after the procedure was completed. AR p. 533 (emphasis added). The letter then states that the decision completed all levels of the grievance process. AR p. 533.

Post-grievance Communications.

December 2005. On December 7, 2005, Mr. Whitley had a conversation with James Zupon, the Plan's Manager of Compliance, Complaints and Grievances, relating to Mrs. Whitley's claims for treatment at Duke. See AR p. 3 (Zupon's December 14, 2005 letter discussing call and responding to inquiries raised). In response to Mr. Whitley's request that the Plan "[e]xplain the protocol that wasn't followed that lead to the denial of benefits," Zupon explains that the difficulty was "the procedure that was performed, rather than a disregarded protocol." AR p. 3.⁴³ Zupon

⁴³ The only "protocol" listed in the denial letter was the "notification protocol." See *supra* p. 42 (quoted AR p. 533).

further explains that “the LVAD for destination therapy *was considered by HAYES to be experimental at the time of service.*” *Id.* (emphasis added). He then asserts that the Plan was not aware before the surgery that Duke intended to place an LVAD *for destination therapy purposes and, had it been so informed, would have advised Duke that the service would not be covered.* ⁴⁴

As to the possible need for a future replacement of the LVAD implant, Zupon states: “As you are aware, the LVAD for destination therapy is currently no longer considered experimental or investigational by HAYES.” AR p. 3. Nothing in this letter indicates *when* HAYES made the change or on what materials it relied in changing its published opinion. No other evidence has been presented as to when this change occurred or on what information the change was based.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

Based on the evidentiary record as summarized above, the court reaches the following conclusions of law.

A. NOTICE

1. The Plan failed to timely assert and later abandoned lack of notice as a basis for denial of the claim.

ERISA requires every employee benefit plan to:

(1) provide adequate notice in writing to any participant or beneficiary whose claim for benefits under the plan has been denied, setting forth the specific reasons for such denial, written in a manner calculated to be understood by the participant, and (2) afford a reasonable opportunity to any participant whose claim for benefits has been denied for a full and fair hearing by the appropriate named fiduciary of the decision denying the claim.

29 U.S.C. § 1133 (1988).

⁴⁴ Thus, to the extent notice is mentioned, it is only in explaining that Duke would have been advised that the LVAD would be treated as experimental if the Plan had known of its intended use. There is no suggestion in this letter that the Plan was not advised of the intent to implant an LVAD for any purpose or of lack of notice as a grounds for denial of the claim.

Corresponding regulatory provisions, likewise, require that notices of benefit denials provide “the specific reason or reasons for the adverse determination” as well as “[r]eference to the specific plan provisions on which the determination is based.” 29 C.F.R. § 2560.503-1(g)(1)(i) & (ii). ERISA regulations also require every employee benefit plan to “establish and maintain a procedure” which affords “a reasonable opportunity to appeal an adverse benefit determination to an appropriate named fiduciary of the plan, and under which there will be a full and fair review of a claim and adverse benefit determination.” 29 C.F.R. § 2560.503-1(h)(1).

As the Fourth Circuit has recognized,

These procedural guidelines are at the foundation of ERISA. Congress intended that ERISA provide plan administrators and participants the opportunity and freedom to resolve internal disputes without necessarily having to resort to the expense and delay of the courts. . . . Given this goal, Congress assured plan participants of procedural fairness, by mandating that plan administrators provide a “full and fair review” of the claims and the specific reasons for claim denials. In the words of the Third Circuit, “‘full and fair review’ must be construed not only to allow a pension plan’s trustees to operate claims procedures without the formality or limitations of adversarial proceedings but also to protect a plan participant from arbitrary or unprincipled decision-making.”

Weaver v. Phoenix Home Life Mut. Ins. Co., 990 F.2d 154, 157 (4th Cir. 1993) (quoting *Grossmuller v. International Union, United Auto., Aerospace and Agric. Implement Workers of Am.*, 715 F.2d 853, 857 (3d Cir. 1983)).

Numerous communications between the Plan and Mrs. Whitley or Duke precede the denial of the first grievance. At least three of these communications expressly address denial of the claim. All three refer only to the Experimental Exclusion.

The first such communication was a teleconference between the Plan and Duke on October 15, 2004. The Plan’s notations regarding this teleconference indicate that Duke was advised that the claim might be denied based on the Experimental Exclusion. AR p. 224 & 227. The next two

communications are in the form of denial letters. The earlier letter is dated October 19, 2004, and was directed to both Duke and Mrs. Whitley. AR p. 28. This letter refers only to the Experimental Exclusion as a basis for denial. The Plan repeated this basis for denial of coverage of the LVAD on November 4, 2004, when it advised Duke that it would not approve a heart transplant. AR p. 29-30. As with the prior call and letters, this letter makes no mention of a concern as to the adequacy of notice.

The only pre-grievance document which suggests any concern as to notice is Hardin's October 13, 2004 computer entry. This entry refers only to a concern that the Plan was not advised of Duke's intent to implant the LVAD *for destination therapy*. There is, however, no evidence that Hardin or any other Plan representative communicated these concerns to Duke or the Whitleys until after the first-level grievance was concluded.

The January 18-19, 2005 email string in which Dr. Hutt recommended denial of the first-level grievance, likewise, fails to mention any concern as to the adequacy of notice. Indeed, Dr. Hutt recommended only that the claim be "*sen[t] out denied as experimental,*" and that the plan "handle any other re-review on the appeals side if it comes to that." AR p. 43 (Hutt email dated January 19, 2005—emphasis added). Donald Pifer, Vice President of Network Management, forwarded Dr. Hutt's comment on to Renee Bouye who responded that she would notify Dee Goodman "to *send out the denial based on the COC we don't cover experimental investigational or unproven* and the Hayes rating was a C or D." AR p. 42 (emphasis added).

This string was forwarded to Goodman at 11:39 a.m. on January 19, 2005. There are no intervening documents or other evidence which would explain why and on whose authority Goodman included lack of notice as a reason for denying this grievance. Nonetheless, the letter suggests that the source was Dr. Hutt: "Our Medical Director reviewed your medical records and

determined that we did not receive notification from you or the hospital requesting services for the Left Ventricular Assistance Device ('LVAD')." AR pp. 25-26. Moreover, this letter suggests a complete lack of notice of an intent to implant an LVAD, rather than relying on the change in purpose between bridge and destination therapy. In any case, this letter, which denied the first-level grievance, constitutes the first notice from the Plan to the Whitleys or Duke that the claim might be denied for lack of notice.

The claim proceeded to a second-level grievance. That grievance was also denied, but only on the basis of the Experimental Exclusion. Lack of notice is not mentioned in the denial letter. AR p.389. Thus, the Plan abandoned lack of notice as a denial reason by not including it in its denial of the second-level grievance.

The letter denying the second-level grievance appears to have crossed in the mail with Mr. Whitley's letter indicating that he had been granted an extension of time to provide materials in support of his second-level grievance. AR pp. 399. The Plan treated this as an invocation of the third-level grievance procedure, rather than as a reason to reopen the second-level grievance.

Presumably recognizing that lack of notice had been abandoned as a denial reason, the Plan instructed the third-level grievance panel: "This is an issue of benefits. The panel should focus on this issue and this issue alone." AR p. 539-40. Thus, the third-level grievance panel was not asked to address the issue of notice.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The summary provided to the third-level grievance panel also stated: "HR notes indicate that member had transplant evaluation done and *was to receive LVAD as bridge*. However, HR was later notified that the *LVAD was for destination*; that she was to have the LVAD for the remainder of her life." AR p. 536 (Grievance Hearing Summary Sheet— emphasis added). This statement suggests that the Plan was aware that Duke intended to implant an LVAD, but was unaware of the particular purpose for which the LVAD was to be implanted (bridge versus destination). Thus, the statement appears to be included to explain why the Plan did not forewarn Duke that the Plan would

Despite this directive and without any notice to the Whitleys of its intent to consider notice, the Plan again relied on lack of notice in denying the third-level grievance. As in the letter denying the first-level grievance, the third-level grievance denial letter asserts that the Plan had no notice of *any* intent to implant an LVAD. AR p. 532-33 (“Our records also indicate that [the] Plan’s notification protocol was not followed as our records show *we were first notified of the LVAD on October 12, 2004, which is post-surgery.*”).⁴⁶

After receiving the denial letter from the third-level grievance panel, Mr. Whitley called James Zupon to discuss the matter further. Zupon responded in a letter dated December 14, 2005 in which he repeats the inquiry and provides a response as follows:

Explain the protocol that wasn’t followed that lead to the denial of benefits? It was the procedure that was performed, rather than a disregarded protocol that lead to the denial of benefits. As indicated in our grievance response letters, the LVAD for destination therapy was considered by HAYES to be experimental at the time of the service.

AR p. 3. The reference to a “protocol” clearly refers to the third-level grievance panel’s reference to the “Plan’s notification protocol.” AR p. 533 (letter denying third-level grievance, quoted above).

Thus, Zupon’s disavowal of reliance on a protocol failure indicates a renewed abandonment of this

deny coverage, under the Experimental Exclusion, if the purpose of the LVAD implant was for destination therapy.

⁴⁶ The third-level grievance panel’s conclusion that the Plan received *no notice* of an intent to implant an LVAD *for any purpose* is inconsistent with any *evidence* which has been disclosed as having been given to the panel. *E.g.* AR p. 536 (quoted in preceding footnote). It would, however, be consistent with the *unsupported characterizations of the record* found in the email Barbara Excell forwarded to James Zupon upon receipt of the third-level grievance. This email stated: “CCP did not authorize the LVAD. CCP was informed of and authorized a complicated CABG Duke performed a right heart prophylactic CABG and a LVAD that CCP did not authorize or even know about until after the procedure.”). Thus, the third-level grievance panel may have relied on erroneous information provided in Excell’s email..

denial reason. What other discussion of notice appears in his letter suggests only that, had the Plan had complete information from Duke prior to the surgery, it could have forewarned Duke that the service would not be covered. It does not suggest that the Plan is relying on notice as an independent denial reason.⁴⁷

Despite Zupon's apparent abandonment of notice as a denial reason, the Plan persists in relying on notice as a denial reason. Specifically, the Plan maintains that it did not receive notice of Duke's intent to implant an LVAD *for any purpose* prior to the date of the surgery. *See, e.g.,* Dkt No. 25, p. 2.

Based on the above sequence of events, the court concludes that notice was not timely raised as a denial reason, was subsequently abandoned, and cannot be relied on in this action. Critically, the facts underlying the notice-based denial were known to the Plan no later than October 13, 2004. No explanation is offered for the delay in raising this denial reason. Neither is there any explanation for the decision to again rely on this denial reason in denying the third-level grievance after not having mentioned it as a denial reason in its letter denying the second-level grievance. By relying on a previously abandoned denial reason in the denial of the final grievance, the Plan deprived Mrs. Whitley of her statutory and regulatory rights to a full and fair review. Finally, the court finds notice was again waived and abandoned as a denial reason in James Zupon's post-grievance letter to Mr. Whitley which disavowed reliance on any "protocol" failure.

As a general rule, late raised denial reasons are remedied by remanding the claim for a full

⁴⁷ In this regard, the letter states: "The notes also indicate the decision to do an LVAD for destination rather than the planned CABG was not made until Saturday, October 9, 2004 [citing Dr. Milano's notes]. [The Plan] was not notified of the decision to perform the LVAD for destination until Tuesday October 12, 2004 . . . one day after the surgery. *Had we been notified of the request for an LVAD prior to this, we could have informed you and Duke it would not be covered.*" AR p. 3 (emphasis added).

and fair review. *Weaver*, 990 F.2d. at 159. This rule may, however, be modified in extraordinary circumstances. *See id.* For example, in *Weaver*, the court found the circumstances to justify entry of judgment in favor of plaintiff where the plan “admitted that it [did] not know the standards by which the decision . . . was made [by the third party administrator] and . . . produced no evidence that it even remotely considered any specific reasons in denying the claim.” *Id.*

The undersigned concludes that the present case presents the type of extraordinary circumstances which justify precluding the Plan from relying on a late-raised denial reason. These extraordinary circumstances include: (1) the Plan’s delay in raising lack of notice as a denial reason *despite full knowledge of the relevant facts* prior to the first denial; (2) the Plan’s abandonment of notice as a denial reason by failing to rely on lack of notice in denying the second-level grievance; (3) the Plan’s failure to otherwise advise the Whitleys of its intent to rely on lack of notice during the third-level grievance; and (4) the Plan’s disavowal of reliance on a “protocol” failure in Zupon’s post-grievance letters.

Finally, the court finds that denial for lack of notice is unfounded for reasons discussed in the remainder of this order. Therefore, remand for reconsideration of this denial reason would be futile.

2. Duke complied with the Plan’s notice requirements.

Because Duke is a Network Provider, the following provision of the Plan document controls notice:

We require notification before you receive certain Covered Health Services. In general, Network providers are responsible for notifying us before they provide these services to you. Your Provider cannot bill you for these services if they fail to notify Us.

AR pp. 874-75 (also indicating, specifically as to non-network providers, that notice provides an

opportunity for the Plan to advise if the service is excluded from coverage). While it is possible that some greater detail as to the required notice is provided in whatever agreement controls the Plan-Network Provider relationship, no such agreement has been provided to the court or referenced by the parties. Thus, the only “notice” requirement is the very generic requirement quoted above.

It is undisputed that Duke gave notice of and received approval to perform heart surgery on Mrs. Whitley and to evaluate her for a possible heart transplant. The precise scope of the authorized surgery is less clear, largely because the Plan has been inconsistent in stating what was approved. Nonetheless, Plan documents created before surgery require the conclusion that the Plan approved, at the least, high-risk CABG. AR p. 6 (Hardin’s October 7, 2004 computer entry indicating Duke had decided to “proceed with a CABG on Monday”).

Plan documents created shortly after surgery also support the conclusion that the Plan gave prior approval for implantation of an LVAD. Indeed, the only “notice” concerns expressed in the contemporaneous records relate to the precise purpose for which the LVAD was to be implanted. See AR p. 9 (Hardin’s October 12, 2004 computer entry indicating that LVAD was placed as bridge to transplant, and stating no concerns as to notice or approval); AR pp. 221-22 (Hardin’s October 13, 2004 computer entries expressing surprise and concern that the LVAD was implanted *as destination therapy*, rather than as a bridge to transplant); AR 537 (third-level Grievance Hearing Summary Sheet acknowledging that HR knew member “was to receive LVAD.” Thus, there is no evidence to support denial on the basis stated by the third-level grievance panel, which relied on the unsupported assumption that the Plan had received no notice at all of an intent to implant an LVAD.

The court’s review of the extensive record suggests only one document on which the third-level grievance panel might have rested such a conclusion. That document is Barbara Excell’s email