Inflation Adjustment Gaps for Hemodialysis in South Korea: An International Reimbursement Process Comparison

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INTRODUCTION

Healthcare systems in many countries periodically **adjust reimbursements** to reflect inflation, economic growth, currency fluctuations, and other factors impacting healthcare costs.
While such mechanisms are commonly applied also in dialysis, the therapeutic materials fee for chronic hemodialysis (HD) in South Korea is an exceptional case.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is

1) to evaluate the reimbursement adjustment framework for HD consumables in South Korea
2) to compare it with selected markets globally and processes within the South Korean health system.

METHOD

A qualitative review of South Korean reimbursement policies for therapeutic materials and dialysis services was conducted, focusing on distinctions between separately reimbursed procedures and bundled payment structures.

Public reimbursement and tariff adjustment frameworks from selected global markets were reviewed to assess the use of annual inflation or cost-adjustment mechanisms.

RESULTS

Since 2009, South Korea has applied **semi-annual reimbursement adjustments** for eligible therapeutic materials linked to USD exchange rate fluctuations. In April 2026, this mechanism resulted in an average **reimbursement increase of approximately 2% for separately billed consumables**. However, HD consumables are reimbursed under a bundled fee and therefore remain excluded from these adjustment mechanisms, despite being affected by the same macroeconomic factors that drive adjustments to other procedures in the South Korean health system. In contrast, several countries globally apply **annual tariff or inflation adjustments within dialysis reimbursement systems** and broader healthcare payment frameworks. The key difference identified is that HD consumables are inherently therapeutic materials but are institutionally bundled under procedure codes, excluding them from reimbursement adjustments.

South Korea

- ✓ Semi-annual reimbursement adjustment
- ✓ Based on USD exchange rate fluctuations
- ✓ Eligibility: Therapeutic materials separately billed

Global Landscape

- ✓ Annual reimbursement adjustment
- ✓ Based on inflation & exchange rate fluctuations
- ✓ Eligibility: Bundled payment incl. therapeutic materials, staff, medication, etc.

Hemodialysis Therapeutic Materials in South Korea

- × Bundled under one fee as a procedure code instead of separately billed like other therapeutic materials
- × Excluded from semi-annual reimbursement adjustment mechanism
- × Affected by same macroeconomic factors no adjustment since 2008

CONCLUSIONS

HD therapeutic materials in South Korea represent an exceptional case within the national reimbursement system. They are excluded from inflation-linked reimbursement adjustments despite existing mechanisms for other healthcare services and materials.

International comparisons highlight a **potential gap in the South Korean reimbursement framework** and support reconsideration of adjustment policies for HD therapeutic materials.

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