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A-2: Apart from facts constituting gross misconduct, the facts surrounding the termination or reduction of hours are irrelevant in determining whether a qualifying event has occurred. Thus, it does not matter whether the employee voluntarily terminated or was discharged. For example, a strike or a lockout is a termination or reduction of hours that constitutes a qualifying event if the strike or lockout results in a loss of coverage as described in paragraph (c) of Q&A-1 of this section. Similarly, a layoff that results in such a loss of coverage is a qualifying event.

[T.D. 8812, 64 FR 5178, Feb. 3, 1999, as amended by T.D. 8928, 66 FR 1852, Jan. 10, 2001]

§ 54.4980B-5 COBRA continuation coverage.

The following questions-and-answers address the requirements for coverage to constitute COBRA continuation coverage:

Q-1: What is COBRA continuation coverage?

A-1: (a) If a qualifying event occurs, each qualified beneficiary (other than a qualified beneficiary for whom the qualifying event will not result in any immediate or deferred loss of coverage) must be offered an opportunity to elect to receive the group health plan coverage that is provided to similarly situated nonCOBRA beneficiaries (ordinarily, the same coverage that the qualified beneficiary had on the day before the qualifying event). See Q&A-3 of § 54.4980B-3 for the definition of similarly situated nonCOBRA beneficiaries. This coverage is COBRA continuation coverage. If coverage is modified for similarly situated nonCOBRA beneficiaries, then the coverage made available to qualified beneficiaries is modified in the same way. If the continuation coverage offered differs in any way from the coverage made available to similarly situated nonCOBRA beneficiaries, the coverage offered does not constitute COBRA continuation coverage and the group health plan is not in compliance with COBRA unless other coverage that does constitute COBRA continuation coverage is also offered. Any elimination or reduction of coverage in anticipation of an event described in paragraph (b) of Q&A-1 of

§ 54.4980B-4 is disregarded for purposes of this Q&A-1 and for purposes of any other reference in §§ 54.4980B-1 through 54.4980B-10 to coverage in effect immediately before (or on the day before) a qualifying event. COBRA continuation coverage must not be conditioned upon, or discriminate on the basis of lack of, evidence of insurability.

(b) In the case of a qualified beneficiary who is a child born to or placed for adoption with a covered employee during a period of COBRA continuation coverage, the child is generally entitled to elect immediately to have the same coverage that dependent children of active employees receive under the benefit packages under which the covered employee has coverage at the time of the birth or placement for adoption. Such a child would be entitled to elect coverage different from that elected by the covered employee during the next available open enrollment period under the plan. See Q&A-4 of this section.

Q-2: What deductibles apply if COBRA continuation coverage is elected?

A-2: (a) Qualified beneficiaries electing COBRA continuation coverage generally are subject to the same deductibles as similarly situated nonCOBRA beneficiaries. If a qualified beneficiary's COBRA continuation coverage begins before the end of a period prescribed for accumulating amounts toward deductibles, the qualified beneficiary must retain credit for expenses incurred toward those deductibles before the beginning of COBRA continuation coverage as though the qualifying event had not occurred. The specific application of this rule depends on the type of deductible, as set forth in paragraphs (b) through (d) of this Q&A-2. Special rules are set forth in paragraph (e) of this Q&A-2, and examples appear in paragraph (f) of this Q&A-2.

(b) If a deductible is computed separately for each individual receiving coverage under the plan, each individual's remaining deductible amount (if any) on the date COBRA continuation coverage begins is equal to that individual's remaining deductible amount immediately before that date.

(c) If a deductible is computed on a family basis, the remaining deductible for the family on the date that COBRA

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continuation coverage begins depends on the members of the family electing COBRA continuation coverage. In computing the family deductible that remains on the date COBRA continuation coverage begins, only the expenses of those family members receiving COBRA continuation coverage need be taken into account. If the qualifying event results in there being more than one family unit (for example, because of a divorce), the family deductible may be computed separately for each resulting family unit based on the members in each unit. These rules apply regardless of whether the plan provides that the family deductible is an alternative to individual deductibles or an additional requirement.

(d) Deductibles that are not described in paragraph (b) or (c) of this Q&A-2 must be treated in a manner consistent with the principles set forth in those paragraphs.

(e) If a deductible is computed on the basis of a covered employee's compensation instead of being a fixed dollar amount and the employee remains employed during the period of COBRA continuation coverage, the plan is permitted to choose whether to apply the deductible by treating the employee's compensation as continuing without change for the duration of the COBRA continuation coverage at the level that was used to compute the deductible in effect immediately before the COBRA continuation coverage began, or to apply the deductible by taking the employee's actual compensation into account. In applying a deductible that is computed on the basis of the covered employee's compensation instead of being a fixed dollar amount, for periods of COBRA continuation coverage in which the employee is not employed by the employer, the plan is required to compute the deductible by treating the employee's compensation as continuing without change for the duration of the COBRA continuation coverage either at the level that was used to compute the deductible in effect immediately before the COBRA continuation coverage began or at the level that was used to compute the deductible in effect immediately before the

employee's employment was terminated.

(f) The rules of this Q&A-2 are illustrated by the following examples; in each example, deductibles under the plan are determined on a calendar year basis:

Example 1. (i) A group health plan applies a separate \$100 annual deductible to each individual it covers. The plan provides that the spouse and dependent children of a covered employee will lose coverage on the last day of the month after the month of the covered employee's death. A covered employee dies on June 11, 2001. The spouse and the two dependent children elect COBRA continuation coverage, which will begin on August 1, 2001. As of July 31, 2001, the spouse has incurred \$80 of covered expenses, the older child has incurred no covered expenses, and the younger one has incurred \$120 of covered expenses (and therefore has already satisfied the deductible).

(ii) At the beginning of COBRA continuation coverage on August 1, the spouse has a remaining deductible of \$20, the older child still has the full \$100 deductible, and the younger one has no further deductible.

Example 2. (i) A group health plan applies a separate \$200 annual deductible to each individual it covers, except that each family member is treated as having satisfied the individual deductible once the family has incurred \$500 of covered expenses during the year. The plan provides that upon the divorce of a covered employee, coverage will end immediately for the employee's spouse and any children who do not remain in the employee's custody. A covered employee with four dependent children is divorced, the spouse obtains custody of the two oldest children, and the spouse and those children all elect COBRA continuation coverage to begin immediately. The family had accumulated \$420 of covered expenses before the divorce, as follows: \$70 by each parent, \$200 by the oldest child, \$80 by the youngest child, and none by the other two children.

(ii) The resulting family consisting of the spouse and the two oldest children accumulated a total of \$270 of covered expenses, and thus the remaining deductible for that family could be as high as \$230 (because the plan would not have to count the incurred expenses of the covered employee and the youngest child). The remaining deductible for the resulting family consisting of the covered employee and the two youngest children is not subject to the rules of this Q&A-2 because their coverage is not COBRA continuation coverage.

Example 3. Each year a group health plan pays 70 percent of the cost of an individual's psychotherapy after that individual's first

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three visits during the year. A qualified beneficiary whose election of COBRA continuation coverage takes effect beginning August 1, 2001 and who has already made two visits as of that date need only pay for one more visit before the plan must begin to pay 70 percent of the cost of the remaining visits during 2001.

Example 4. (i) A group health plan has a \$250 annual deductible per covered individual. The plan provides that if the deductible is not satisfied in a particular year, expenses incurred during October through December of that year are credited toward satisfaction of the deductible in the next year. A qualified beneficiary who has incurred covered expenses of \$150 from January through September of 2001 and \$40 during October elects COBRA continuation coverage beginning November 1, 2001.

(ii) The remaining deductible amount for this qualified beneficiary is \$60 at the beginning of the COBRA continuation coverage. If this individual incurs covered expenses of \$50 in November and December of 2001 combined (so that the \$250 deductible for 2001 is not satisfied), the \$90 incurred from October through December of 2001 are credited toward satisfaction of the deductible amount for 2002.

Q-3: How do a plan's limits apply to COBRA continuation coverage?

A-3: (a) Limits are treated in the same way as deductibles (see Q&A-2 of this section). This rule applies both to limits on plan benefits (such as a maximum number of hospital days or dollar amount of reimbursable expenses) and limits on out-of-pocket expenses (such as a limit on copayments, a limit on deductibles plus copayments, or a catastrophic limit). This rule applies equally to annual and lifetime limits and applies equally to limits on specific benefits and limits on benefits in the aggregate under the plan.

(b) The rule of this Q&A-3 is illustrated by the following examples: in each example limits are determined on a calendar year basis:

Example 1. (i) A group health plan pays for a maximum of 150 days of hospital confinement per individual per year. A covered employee who has had 20 days of hospital confinement as of May 1, 2001 terminates employment and elects COBRA continuation coverage as of that date.

(ii) During the remainder of the year 2001 the plan need only pay for a maximum of 130 days of hospital confinement for this individual.

Example 2. (i) A group health plan reimburses a maximum of \$20,000 of covered ex-

penses per family per year, and the same \$20,000 limit applies to unmarried covered employees. A covered employee and spouse who have no children divorce on May 1, 2001, and the spouse elects COBRA continuation coverage as of that date. In 2001, the employee had incurred \$5,000 of expenses and the spouse had incurred \$8,000 before May 1.

(ii) The plan can limit its reimbursement of the amount of expenses incurred by the spouse on and after May 1 for the remainder of the year to \$12,000 ($\$20,000 - \$8,000 = \$12,000$). The remaining limit for the employee is not subject to the rules of this Q&A-3 because the employee's coverage is not COBRA continuation coverage.

Example 3. (i) A group health plan pays for 80 percent of covered expenses after satisfaction of a \$100-per-individual deductible, and the plan pays for 100 percent of covered expenses after a family has incurred out-of-pocket costs of \$2,000. The plan provides that upon the divorce of a covered employee, coverage will end immediately for the employee's spouse and any children who do not remain in the employee's custody. An employee and spouse with three dependent children divorce on June 1, 2001, and one of the children remains with the employee. The spouse elects COBRA continuation coverage as of that date for the spouse and the other two children. During January through May of 2001, the spouse incurred \$600 of covered expenses and each of the two children in the spouse's custody after the divorce incurred covered expenses of \$1,100. This resulted in total out-of-pocket costs for these three individuals of \$800 (\$300 total for the three deductibles, plus \$500 for 20 percent of the other \$2,500 in incurred expenses [$\$600 + \$1,100 + \$1,100 = \$2,800; \$2,800 - \$300 = \$2,500$]).

(ii) For the remainder of 2001, the resulting family consisting of the spouse and two children has an out-of-pocket limit of \$1,200 ($\$2,000 - \$800 = \$1,200$). The remaining out-of-pocket limit for the resulting family consisting of the employee and one child is not subject to the rules of this Q&A-3 because their coverage is not COBRA continuation coverage.

Q-4: Can a qualified beneficiary who elects COBRA continuation coverage ever change from the coverage received by that individual immediately before the qualifying event?

A-4: (a) In general, a qualified beneficiary need only be given an opportunity to continue the coverage that she or he was receiving immediately before the qualifying event. This is true regardless of whether the coverage received by the qualified beneficiary before the qualifying event ceases to be of value to the qualified beneficiary,

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such as in the case of a qualified beneficiary covered under a region-specific health maintenance organization (HMO) who leaves the HMO's service region. The only situations in which a qualified beneficiary must be allowed to change from the coverage received immediately before the qualifying event are as set forth in paragraphs (b) and (c) of this Q&A-4 and in Q&A-1 of this section (regarding changes to or elimination of the coverage provided to similarly situated nonCOBRA beneficiaries).

(b) If a qualified beneficiary participates in a region-specific benefit package (such as an HMO or an on-site clinic) that will not service her or his health needs in the area to which she or he is relocating (regardless of the reason for the relocation), the qualified beneficiary must be given, within a reasonable period after requesting other coverage, an opportunity to elect alternative coverage that the employer or employee organization makes available to active employees. If the employer or employee organization makes group health plan coverage available to similarly situated nonCOBRA beneficiaries that can be extended in the area to which the qualified beneficiary is relocating, then that coverage is the alternative coverage that must be made available to the relocating qualified beneficiary. If the employer or employee organization does not make group health plan coverage available to similarly situated nonCOBRA beneficiaries that can be extended in the area to which the qualified beneficiary is relocating but makes coverage available to other employees that can be extended in that area, then the coverage made available to those other employees must be made available to the relocating qualified beneficiary. The effective date of the alternative coverage must be not later than the date of the qualified beneficiary's relocation, or, if later, the first day of the month following the month in which the qualified beneficiary requests the alternative coverage. However, the employer or employee organization is not required to make any other coverage available to the relocating qualified beneficiary if the only coverage the employer or employee organization

makes available to active employees is not available in the area to which the qualified beneficiary relocates (because all such coverage is region-specific and does not service individuals in that area).

(c) If an employer or employee organization makes an open enrollment period available to similarly situated active employees with respect to whom a qualifying event has not occurred, the same open enrollment period rights must be made available to each qualified beneficiary receiving COBRA continuation coverage. An open enrollment period means a period during which an employee covered under a plan can choose to be covered under another group health plan or under another benefit package within the same plan, or to add or eliminate coverage of family members.

(d) The rules of this Q&A-4 are illustrated by the following examples:

Example 1. (i) *E* is an employee who works for an employer that maintains several group health plans. Under the terms of the plans, if an employee chooses to cover any family members under a plan, all family members must be covered by the same plan and that plan must be the same as the plan covering the employee. Immediately before *E*'s termination of employment (for reasons other than gross misconduct), *E* is covered along with *E*'s spouse and children by a plan. The coverage under that plan will end as a result of the termination of employment.

(ii) Upon *E*'s termination of employment, each of the four family members is a qualified beneficiary. Even though the employer maintains various other plans and options, it is not necessary for the qualified beneficiaries to be allowed to switch to a new plan when *E* terminates employment.

(iii) COBRA continuation coverage is elected for each of the four family members. Three months after *E*'s termination of employment there is an open enrollment period during which similarly situated active employees are offered an opportunity to choose to be covered under a new plan or to add or eliminate family coverage.

(iv) During the open enrollment period, each of the four qualified beneficiaries must be offered the opportunity to switch to another plan (as though each qualified beneficiary were an individual employee). For example, each member of *E*'s family could choose coverage under a separate plan, even though the family members of employed individuals could not choose coverage under separate plans. Of course, if each family

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member chooses COBRA continuation coverage under a separate plan, the plan can require payment for each family member that is based on the applicable premium for individual coverage under that separate plan. See Q&A-1 of § 54.4980B-8.

Example 2. (i) The facts are the same as in *Example 1*, except that *E*'s family members are not covered under *E*'s group health plan when *E* terminates employment.

(ii) Although the family members do not have to be given an opportunity to elect COBRA continuation coverage, *E* must be allowed to add them to *E*'s COBRA continuation coverage during the open enrollment period. This is true even though the family members are not, and cannot become, qualified beneficiaries (see Q&A-1 of § 54.4980B-3).

Q-5: Aside from open enrollment periods, can a qualified beneficiary who has elected COBRA continuation coverage choose to cover individuals (such as newborn children, adopted children, or new spouses) who join the qualified beneficiary's family on or after the date of the qualifying event?

A-5: (a) Yes. Under section 9801, employees eligible to participate in a group health plan (whether or not participating), as well as former employees participating in a plan (referred to in those rules as participants), are entitled to special enrollment rights for certain family members upon the loss of other group health plan coverage or upon the acquisition by the employee or participant of a new spouse or of a new dependent through birth, adoption, or placement for adoption, if certain requirements are satisfied. Employees not participating in the plan also can obtain rights for self-enrollment under those rules. Once a qualified beneficiary is receiving COBRA continuation coverage (that is, has timely elected and made timely payment for COBRA continuation coverage), the qualified beneficiary has the same right to enroll family members under those special enrollment rules as if the qualified beneficiary were an employee or participant within the meaning of those rules. However, neither a qualified beneficiary who is not receiving COBRA continuation coverage nor a former qualified beneficiary has any special enrollment rights under those rules.

(b) In addition to the special enrollment rights described in paragraph (a) of this Q&A-5, if the plan covering the

qualified beneficiary provides that new family members of active employees can become covered (either automatically or upon an appropriate election) before the next open enrollment period, then the same right must be extended to the new family members of a qualified beneficiary.

(c) If the addition of a new family member will result in a higher applicable premium (for example, if the qualified beneficiary was previously receiving COBRA continuation coverage as an individual, or if the applicable premium for family coverage depends on family size), the plan can require the payment of a correspondingly higher amount for the COBRA continuation coverage. See Q&A-1 of § 54.4980B-8.

(d) The right to add new family members under this Q&A-5 is in addition to the rights that newborn and adopted children of covered employees may have as qualified beneficiaries; see Q&A-1 in § 54.4980B-3.

[T.D. 8812, 64 FR 5180, Feb. 3, 1999, as amended by T.D. 8928, 66 FR 1852, Jan. 10, 2001]

§ 54.4980B-6 Electing COBRA continuation coverage.

The following questions-and-answers address the manner in which COBRA continuation coverage is elected:

Q-1: What is the election period and how long must it last?

A-1: (a) A group health plan can condition the availability of COBRA continuation coverage upon the timely election of such coverage. An election of COBRA continuation coverage is a timely election if it is made during the election period. The election period must begin not later than the date the qualified beneficiary would lose coverage on account of the qualifying event. (See paragraph (c) of Q&A-1 of § 54.4980B-4 for the meaning of *lose coverage*.) The election period must not end before the date that is 60 days after the later of—

(1) The date the qualified beneficiary would lose coverage on account of the qualifying event; or

(2) The date notice is provided to the qualified beneficiary of her or his right to elect COBRA continuation coverage.

(b) An election is considered to be made on the date it is sent to the plan administrator.