



## POLICY & PRACTICE

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### No H1N1 Vaccine–Syndrome Link

The pandemic influenza A(H1N1) vaccine does not appear to increase the risk of Guillain-Barré syndrome, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The agency is basing its conclusion on surveillance in 10 states from Oct. 1, 2009 through Feb. 15, 2010. During that time, the CDC identified 166 confirmed or probable cases of Guillain-Barré syndrome. Of those, 13 were among patients who had been vaccinated against the H1N1 virus before their symptoms began. Although the current data don't suggest that there is an increased risk from the vaccine, the CDC emphasized the need for continued surveillance. Last fall, officials at the CDC called on neurologists to report any possible new cases of Guillain-Barré syndrome following H1N1 vaccination. In 1976, Guillain-Barré cases occurred in some of the people who received the swine flu vaccine at that time.

### Gene-Test Registry Planned

With an eye toward understanding how genetics affects health, officials at the National Institutes of Health plan to establish by next year a single public registry for information on genetic tests. There are currently more than 1,600 genetics tests available but there is no single public way to search for information

about their availability, validity, and usefulness, according to the NIH. “The need for this database reflects how far we have come in the last 10 years,” NIH director Dr. Francis S. Collins commented in a statement. “The registry will help consumers and health care providers determine the best options for genetic testing, which is becoming more and more common and accessible.” More information on the registry is available online at [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/gtr/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/gtr/).

### Seniors Hit by Drug Expenses

Medicare Part D enrollees who used high-cost, “specialty tier” drugs are much more likely than other beneficiaries to reach the “doughnut hole,” when they must pay 100% of prescription costs until the totals they and the plans pay reach \$6,154, according to a report prepared by the Government Accountability Office. More than half of Medicare beneficiaries with drug coverage who took one or more of the high-cost drugs spent at least \$4,645 out of their own pockets in 2007 and reached the high end of the doughnut hole, or catastrophic threshold, beyond which the government pays at least 80% of all drug costs. Meanwhile, only 8% of beneficiaries who did not use specialty tier-eligible drugs reached the catastrophic threshold. Specialty tier drugs

include immunosuppressant drugs, those used to treat cancer, and antiviral drugs. Medicare supplement-plan sponsors told the GAO that they had little leverage to negotiate price concessions for most of the specialty tier-eligible drugs.

### Public Health Funding Is Down

Federal funding for public health has remained flat for nearly 5 years and states have cut a total of nearly \$392 million in public health programs in the past year, according to a report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Trust for America's Health. That has left communities around the country struggling to deliver basic disease prevention and emergency health preparedness services, the report said. “Chronic underfunding for public health means that millions of Americans are needlessly suffering from preventable diseases, health care costs have skyrocketed, and our workforce is not as healthy as it needs to be to compete with the rest of the world,” said Jeffrey Levi, Ph.D., who is the trust's executive director. States in the Midwest received the least funding for disease prevention in public health in fiscal year 2009—a total of \$16.50 per person and considerably less than the \$19.80 per person that states in the northeast received. Western states received \$19.22 per person, whereas southern states got \$19.75 per person.

### Food Poisoning Cost Is Sickening

Each case of foodborne illness, such as from *Escherichia coli* and *Campylobacter*,

costs an average of \$1,850 in treatment and other health costs, totaling \$152 billion for the nation annually, according to findings in a study by the Pew Charitable Trusts at Georgetown University in Washington. Cases related to tainted produce cost \$39 billion in just medical costs per year. “Although this study only addresses the health-related costs of foodborne illness, the total cost of foodborne illness also includes costs to industry and government from outbreaks,” according to the report. Totals vary significantly among the states. The 10 states with the highest costs per case were Hawaii, Florida, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, the District of Columbia, Mississippi, New York, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are 76 million new cases of food-related illness that result in 5,000 deaths and 325,000 hospitalizations in the United States each year.

—Mary Ellen Schneider

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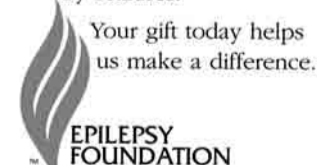


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