Policy & Practice

President Signs TBI Legislation

President Bush recently signed legislation to expand funding for traumatic brain injury rehabilitation programs. The reauthorization of the Traumatic Brain Injury Act (S. 793) also provides funding to study the incidence of traumatic brain injury and disability associated with it. Each year, about 1.4 million people sustain a traumatic brain injury, resulting in long-term disability, according to Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), a bill sponsor. In addition, TBI accounted for $60 billion in both direct medical costs and indirect costs, such as lost productivity. "The reauthorized TBI Act promises to build on its tremendously successful first 10 years by extending services and establishing new studies to register brain injured veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan," Rep. Bill Pascrell (D-N.J.), another sponsor, said.

Inpatient Rehab Proposal Issued

Officials at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services issued a proposal to change payment rates for services provided at inpatient rehabilitation facilities, including rehabilitation for stroke and spinal cord injuries. CMS estimates the proposed changes will result in a decrease in aggregate payments of $20 million in fiscal year 2009. The CMS proposed rule also calls for changing the case mix group relative weights and the average length of stay values based on updated data. The payment changes would go into effect on Oct. 1 and would apply to more than 200 freestanding facilities and inpatient rehabilitation facilities, and more than 1,000 units in acute care hospitals. Comments will be accepted until July 20. A final rule is expected Aug. 1.

2008 Potamkin Prize Awarded

The American Academy of Neurology has awarded three researchers the Potamkin Prize in Alzheimer's disease research. The three researchers will split the $100,000 prize, designated for continuing their research efforts. This year's prize went to Dr. Clifford R. Jack Jr. of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., and to Dr. William E. Klunk and Chester A. Mathis, Ph.D., both of the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Jack's research involves the use of MRI measurements to assess the neurodegenerative stages of Alzheimer's disease. Dr. Klunk and Dr. Mathis developed a novel tracer for positron emission tomography that can identify the amyloid protein deposits characteristically present with Alzheimer's disease to help identify Alzheimer's earlier.

Half of Health Spending Wasted

Wasteful spending in the U.S. health system could amount to as much as $1.2 trillion of the $2.2 trillion spent annually, according to a report from the PriceWaterhouseCoopers' Health Research Institute. Defensive medicine was identified as the biggest excess, followed by inefficient administration and the cost of care necessitated by preventable conditions, such as obesity, according to the report. The impact of issues such as nonadherence to medical advice and prescriptions, alcohol abuse, smoking, and obesity "are exponential," the report said.

Demand Strong for New MDs

The job market for new physicians in New York is characterized by strong demand, according to a recent study from the Center for Health Workforce Studies at the University of Albany School of Public Health. The need for primary care physicians was comparable with the demand for specialists, with new primary care doctors reporting an increasing number of job offers and increasing median starting income. In addition, the median starting income for new physicians grew by 13% from 2005 to 2007. Median starting income was $142,100 for primary care physicians.

Disciplinary Actions Decline

The number and rate of serious disciplinary actions against physicians has decreased for the third consecutive year, according to Public Citizen's annual ranking of state medical boards. Since 2004, the number of serious disciplinary actions against doctors has decreased 17%, resulting in 553 fewer serious actions in 2007 than in 2004. Taking into account the increasing number of U.S. physicians since 2004, the rate of serious actions has fallen 22% since then, when calculated per 1,000 physicians, according to Public Citizen. The annual rankings are based on data from the Federation of State Medical Boards.

—Mary Ellen Schneider

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