POLICY & PRACTICE

Diabetes Registry OK for PQRI

The National Committee for Quality Assurance's diabetes registry has been designated by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services as a registry that can be used for quality reporting, NCQA has announced. Physicians who have earned recognition through the NCQA's Diabetes Recognition Program may now opt to have NCQA submit their clinical data to Medicare for use in the Physician Quality Reporting Initiative, which rewards physicians financially for collecting and reporting performance data. "Using NCQA data to qualify for the PQRI allows NCQA-recognized providers … to streamline their reporting and devote more resources to patient care," NCQA said in a press release. Interested providers can submit data to NCQA for the 2009 PQRI registry through Jan. 31, 2010.

Vermont Bans Most Pharma Gifts

Vermont Gov. Jim Douglas (R) has signed into law a bill that prohibits manufacturers of drugs, medical devices, and biologics from providing free gifts, including meals and travel, to physicians and other health care providers. The toughest of its kind in the nation, the legislation also requires disclosure of any allowed gifts or payments, regardless of their value. In 2002, a Vermont law required disclosure of gifts or payments of $25 or more. Under the stronger law, manufacturers can give physicians only gifts such as samples intended for patients, "reasonable quantities" of medical device evaluation or demonstration units, and copies of peer-reviewed articles. Companies still can provide scholarships or other support for medical students, residents, and fellows to attend educational events held by professional associations, as long as the association selects the scholarship recipient.

Benefits of the Recession

More employees are saying that living a healthy lifestyle is a priority compared with a year ago, "in perhaps a nod to controlling their own health care costs," according to the National Business Group on Health. The group surveyed 1,500 workers between the ages of 22 and 69; all worked at companies with at least 2,000 employees. The survey found that 34% of respondents reported exercising more, 46% said they were eating healthier, and 44% reported eating out less at fast-food restaurants. On the negative side, 27% of respondents reported forgoing health care treatment to save money on copayments or coinsurance costs. One in five respondents skipped taking their prescription drug medication dosage as prescribed by their doctor. "The National Business Group on Health believes the survey data provide a pathway for businesses to help their workers cope—and thrive—despite the bad economy, including offering financial incentives to motivate health behavior changes; disseminating more information about the costs and quality of services at a provider level … and providing more targeted communications based on specific health conditions," the group said in a statement.

Bankruptcies, Illness Linked

Medical problems contributed to nearly two-thirds of all bankruptcies in the United States in 2007, according to a study in the American Journal of Medicine. Based on court-record reviews and interviews of more than 2,300 bankruptcy filers in 2007, the study found that 62% of filers cited medical debts and income lost to illness as reasons for seeking bankruptcy. Of these "medically bankrupt families," 9 out of 10 said they had medical debts over $5,000, and the rest met criteria for medical bankruptcy because they had lost significant income because of illness or mortgaged a home to pay medical bills. Out-of-pocket medical costs averaged $17,943 for all medically bankrupt families, including the three-quarters of families that had insurance at the outset of their problems. Most medical debtors were well-educated, owned homes, and had middle-class occupations, the study found.

Obama: Give MedPAC More Clout

The Obama administration wants to give MedPAC greater influence. In a June 2 letter to Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.), President Obama said he supported giving each MedPAC recommendation the force of law unless it is opposed by a joint resolution of Congress. This appeared to embrace the approach in the MedPAC Reform Act of 2009, which Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-W.Va.) introduced in May. Currently, MedPAC advises Congress, which then decides whether to act on the recommendations. At a Brookings Institution conference in mid-June, White House Office of Management and Budget Director Peter Orszag reiterated support for giving MedPAC more teeth. Mr. Orszag said the administration wanted to "take the MedPAC recommendations and, rather than having them sit on a shelf somewhere, have them protected in a fast track procedure, voted up or down as a package, and considered within a limited period of time so they become much more relevant."

Genetics Education Seen Lacking

The development of personalized medicine is hindered by doctors' lack of education about genetic screening tests, speakers at a Personalized Medicine Colloquium said last month. Education on interpretation of genetic tests in medical schools "is not adequate yet," said Affymetrix Chief Medical Officer Rick Hockett. Joseph McInerney, executive director of the National Coalition for Health Professional Education in Genetics, agreed that medical schools may not be preparing new doctors to incorporate genetics research into clinical practice. McInerney said there is not much research data about genetics education in medical schools, but he did cite a 2007 study of 150 medical school educators that showed 62% of respondents offered between 20 and 40 hours of instruction in genetics, but only 11% of them taught practical applications of genetics in addition to general concepts of genetics.

—Joyce Frieden

Hamburg Lists Priorities for FDA

WASHINGTON — Regulating overseas drugmakers who export their products to the United States will become a bigger focus of the Food and Drug Administration, FDA Commissioner Margaret Hamburg said at the annual meeting of the Endocrine Society.

"Food and product safety is a very compelling concern to me," said Dr. Hamburg, who was confirmed by the Senate on May 18. "For FDA to reenter our modern, global world is a high priority. … When you look at the number of facilities overseas all around the world that are manufacturing both drugs and food, it's a huge and growing challenge."

Like Dr. Francis Collins, a possible candidate for the office of director of the National Institutes of Health, who addressed the meeting the previous day, Dr. Hamburg called for more collaboration between her agency and the pharmaceutical industry. "Regulatory science is an essential yet still underdeveloped field," she said. "It's my hope to see expanded efforts in this area, including engaging academic scientists at research universities, along with industry, and [encouraging] more research aimed at addressing unmet scientific needs involving the safety and effectiveness of regulated products, as well as how to best leverage emergent science and technology to strengthen and streamline the drug and product review process."

Dr. Hamburg also called for improving conditions for the agency's scientists. "We have extraordinary talent at the FDA, but over the years, important aspects of our scientific endeavor have been underresourced and underappreciated, and this must change," she said. "We must be able to recruit and retain the best crop of scientists, and give them the facilities and opportunities they need to do their job."

—Joyce Frieden

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