



POLICY & PRACTICE

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Colchicine Discounts Expanded

URL Pharma Inc. has expanded its patient assistance program for gout and familial Mediterranean fever patients taking Colchrys (colchicine). Uninsured and Medicare Part D patients with household incomes up to six times the federal poverty level will be eligible to receive the drug at a discount. For example, patients with household incomes up to \$88,000 per year for a family of four may receive Colchrys for \$5 per month. Patients can sign up for the program at www.needymeds.org or at www.colchrys.com.

RA Drug's Future Looks Lucrative

AstraZeneca is making a down payment of \$100 million for the right to commercialize some uses of Rigel Pharmaceuticals Inc.'s R788 (fostamatinib disodium), which has completed phase II trials in patients with rheumatoid arthritis. The drug is an oral spleen tyrosine kinase (SyK) inhibitor. Under the deal, AstraZeneca will have exclusive rights to any indications of fostamatinib disodium besides rheumatoid arthritis, as well as to Rigel's portfolio of oral SyK inhibitors. AstraZeneca will design a phase III program for fostamatinib disodium with the goal of filing new drug applications with both the Food and Drug Administration and the European Medicines Agency sometime in

2013. If the drug meets specified development, regulatory, and early-sales targets, AstraZeneca could pay another \$345 million to Rigel. And if the drug becomes a commercial success, Rigel could receive another \$800 million plus royalties. "There is a very real and pressing unmet need in the area of rheumatoid arthritis," Anders Ekblom, executive vice president of development for AstraZeneca, said in a statement. "AstraZeneca looks forward to working together with Rigel to continue development of this innovative investigational compound."

Government Workers Covered

Two-thirds of the nation's nearly 20 million state and local government workers got their health insurance through their employers in 2008, a much higher percentage than among private sector workers, according to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Premiums for one-person plans ranged from \$4,560 to \$6,631; family plan premiums cost between \$12,068 and \$16,965 per year. New England government workers had the highest average premiums, and insured singles in that region were subject to the most cost sharing in the country. The family plans of workers in Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas were subject to the highest cost sharing. Work-

ers in New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania contributed the least to their premiums for both one-person and family coverage, the report said.

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 that they and the plans pay reach \$6,154, according to a Government Accountability Office report. 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 (the 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, drugs 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 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, a report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Trust for America's

Health shows. 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, which is 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.

FDA Warns on Food Labels

The FDA has notified 17 food manufacturers, including Gorton's Inc. and Nestlé, that labeling for some of their food products violates the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. Violations cited in the warning letters include unauthorized health claims, unauthorized nutrient-content claims, and the unauthorized use of terms such as "healthy," the FDA said. Nestlé, for example, was warned about using "100% juice" to describe a product that had added flavors. The FDA told Gorton's that its fish fillet packages must disclose high levels of sodium, saturated fat, and total fat to accompany the claim of zero trans fats.

—Mary Ellen Schneider

CLASSIFIEDS

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PROFESSIONAL OPPORTUNITIES



A progressive, well established 4 physician Rheumatology practice in Central Pennsylvania is seeking a fifth board certified/board eligible Rheumatologist.

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