POLICY & PRACTICE

Alzheimer's: No. 6 Cause of Death

Alzheimer's disease has become the sixth leading cause of death in the United States, according to 2006 mortality data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics. AD moved up from the seventh spot on the CDC's list of the 15 leading causes of death even though deaths from the disease dropped 0.9% to nearly 73,000 from the year before. "It is vitally important that we increase Alzheimer's research funding to slow or stop the progression of this devastating disease," William Thies, Ph.D., vice president of medical and scientific relations at the Alzheimer's Association, said in a statement. The organization estimates that there are currently 5.2 million Americans living with Alzheimer's disease, and it predicts that by 2010 there will be nearly half a million new cases each year.

DEA Proposes Electronic Rx

Physicians would have the option of issuing prescriptions electronically for controlled substances under a proposed regulation issued by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in late June. The idea is to allow physicians, pharmacists, and hospital staffs to use modern technology while still adhering to the government's system of controls for these prescriptions, according to the DEA. For example, the proposed rule contains a series of practitioner requirements, including that the physician must adopt procedures to protect passwords and other authentication tools against theft or loss. The DEA expects that the proposal could reduce paperwork for DEA registrants and potentially reduce forged prescriptions. "Our goal is to put in place an electronic prescribing system that is efficient [and] medically beneficial to patients and prescribers," Joseph Rannazzisi, deputy assistant administrator for the Office of Diversion Control, said. The DEA will accept comments through Sept. 25.

DOD Improves TBI Screening

The Department of Defense is making progress on screening troops for traumatic brain injury (TBI) and on screening for mental health issues before deployment, but there are still gaps, according to a report released last month by the Government Accountability Office. The agency determined that clinicians have received inconsistent instructions on predeployment screening. During visits to three sites, for instance, investigators found that physicians did not know they were supposed to review medical records as part of the predeployment screen. The tracking of referrals is often hampered by a lack of electronic records and by the fact that National Guard and military reserve troops receive civilian care, said the agency. The military is doing better on TBI screening, said the GAO. Screening questions were added in January to postdeployment assessments; starting in July 2008, all troops will be assessed for mild TBI before they go overseas.

Physical Activity Guidelines Coming

Americans should engage in 2.5-5 hours per week of vigorous physical activity to maintain a healthy lifestyle, according to evidence-based recommendations from the Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee. The committee was formed in June 2007 by the Health and Human Services secretary to review the existing scientific literature and develop a comprehensive set of physical activity recommendations. The committee's work will be used by DHHS to prepare a set of physical activity guidelines to be released later this year. The committee found that 2.5 hours a week of moderate to vigorous activity had been consistently observed to help lower the risk of low-cause mortality, coronary heart disease, stroke, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes in adults. But more activity is needed to significantly lower the rates of colon and breast cancer and to prevent unhealthy weight gain. The range required to achieve those outcomes is 3-5 hours per week of moderate to vigorous activity. The report is at www.health.gov/PAguidelines.

AMA Launches Report Card

The American Medical Association in June launched a campaign to cut waste from the insurance claims process with a new health insurer report card. "To diagnose the areas of greatest concern within the claims processing system, the AMA has developed its first online rating of health insurers," said Dr. William Dolan, an AMA board member. The report card, based on a random sample pulled from more than 5 million services billed electronically to Medicare and seven health insurers, found that insurers reported to physicians the correct contracted payment rate only 62%-87% of the time. In addition, it found that there is extremely wide variation among payers as to how often they apply computer-generated edits to reduce payments—from a low of less than 0.5% to a high of more than 9%. Physicians spend as much as 14% of their total revenue to ensure accurate insurance payments for their services, according to the AMA.

—Mary Ellen Schneider