

POLICY & PRACTICE

Health Spending Continues to Soar

Health care spending in the United States will nearly double to \$4.1 trillion by 2016, according to an analysis by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The analysts project that the average annual growth in health care spending will remain at around 6.9% for the next 10 years. The findings were published in the Feb. 21 Web edition of Health Affairs. They predict that by 2016, prescription drug spending will reach \$497.5 billion, more than double the spending for 2006. The rate of growth in physician and clinical spending is expected to slow in the coming decade, according to the analysis. Even so, spending for physician services is expected to reach \$819.9 billion by 2016. Physician spending in 2006 is projected at \$447 billion. "As the nation moves from more traditional sources of insurance, such as employer-based coverage, to more federal- and state-provided health care, we will continue to face tough questions about how we finance our health care bill," John Poisal, deputy director of the National Health Statistics Group at CMS, said in a statement.

FDA to Regulate Tobacco?

It seemed like back to the future in Wash-

ington on Feb. 15, when Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) presided at a press briefing announcing a proposal to give the Food and Drug Administration the authority to regulate cigarettes as a drug delivery device. In the mid-1990s, Dr. David Kessler, then FDA commissioner, made a bid to do just that, but lost in a battle that ended at the Supreme Court. Since then, congressional bids to do the same have failed. Sen. Kennedy declared that 2007 is the lucky year. "The likelihood of passage is extremely high," he said of his bill, which according to cosponsor Sen. John Cornyn (R-Tex.) already has 30 allies, 11 of them Republicans. The bill would give FDA more power to restrict tobacco ads and sales to children in particular, and require reduction of nicotine levels and bigger warnings on tobacco products. President George W. Bush has not shown support, but Sen. Cornyn said he'd encourage him to sign it into law if the bill passes the House and Senate.

Performance Data to Patients

CMS has begun laying the groundwork for the release of physician performance data to Medicare beneficiaries. The release will initially come through four regional collaboratives—Indiana Health Information

Exchange, Massachusetts Health Quality Partners, Minnesota Community Measurement, and the Wisconsin Collaborative for Healthcare Quality. The four have agreed to create patient-friendly reports that combine Medicare and private insurance data. CMS said it would bring on two more collaboratives in the near future. Data will also be given to physicians for quality improvement purposes, and will be extracted from AQA-approved quality measures, such as whether physicians measure hemoglobin A_{1c} levels in diabetic patients twice a year. According to a statement by CMS, the data release is partly in response to President Bush's August 2006 Executive Order encouraging interoperable health information technology, transparency of pricing data and quality information, and use of incentives to promote high-quality, cost-effective care. The order also directed federal agencies to share health quality data with beneficiaries.

Katrina's Long-Term Emotional Impact

Mississippi children and families displaced by Hurricane Katrina continue to have emotional problems, according to a report from Columbia University and the Children's Health Fund. The researchers interviewed 576 adults from randomly selected households displaced by the hurricane and found that more than half of the

parents reported that at least one child in the family had experienced emotional or behavioral issues following Katrina, but only 29% had sought some form of professional help. "This latest study suggests that as many as one in three children are already suffering from significant mental health, behavioral, and school-related problems," Dr. Irwin Redlener, president of the Children's Health Fund, said in a statement. About 62% of caregivers surveyed scored low on a standardized mental health instrument, suggesting high levels of clinical anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder. The findings mirror those of last year's survey of Louisiana families by Columbia University and the Children's Health Fund.

More Americans Donating Organs

The percentage of Americans agreeing to become organ donors as indicated on driver's license or donor cards is increasing, the Health Resources and Services Administration announced. A Gallup Organization survey found that 53% of Americans listed themselves as donors in 2005, almost double the 28% who reported doing so in 1993. Nearly all (97%) of the 2,000 survey respondents said they would donate a family member's organs if they knew the person's wishes ahead of time.

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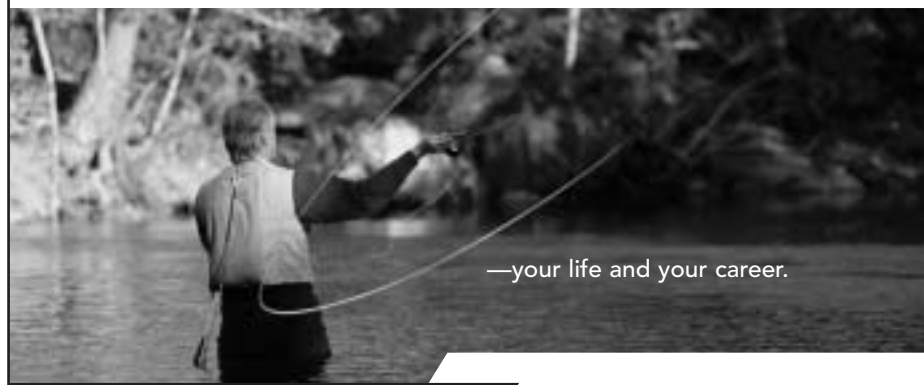
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