Use of Medical Technology, Drugs Soared, CDC Shows

BY MARY ANN MOON

The use of medical technology has grown dramatically over the last decade, according to the federal government's annual health report.

That's just one finding in the massive "Health, United States, 2009," a snapshot of Americans' health, which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention compiles yearly as "an essential step in making sound health policy and setting research and program priorities."

This year's edition, the 33rd, includes a special section on medical technology, which includes procedures, tests, drugs, devices, and support systems such as computerized records. The principal findings include:

▶ The use of MRI, CT, and PET imaging soared during the past decade. The number of such imaging studies either ordered or provided by physician offices and hospital outpatient departments more than tripled; those ordered or provided by emergency departments quadrupled.

▶ The rate of knee replacement surgery performed in patients aged 45 years and older rose 70% during the same interval, from 26 to 45 per 10,000 population. The rate of total hip replacement surgery increased by 33%, and that of partial hip replacements increased by 60%.

▶ The rate of angioplasty without stent placement declined by 80% during the past decade. Drug-eluting stents have rapidly replaced bare-metal stents and were used in 75% of angioplasties in 2006.

▶ The number of assisted reproductive technology cycles doubled during the past decade, with the fastest rate of growth occurring in women older than 40 (11% per year).

▶ The rate of outpatient upper endoscopies rose by 90% and the rate of outpatient colonoscopy tripled during the same interval.

▶ The use of antidiabetic drugs among patients aged 45 and older increased approximately 50%, and that of statins soared tenfold in the past decade.

▶ The percentage of people taking at least one prescription drug during the preceding month rose from 38% in the 1980s and 1990s to 47% in recent years. The percentage taking three or more prescription drugs also increased, from 11% to 21%, during that time.

The full report is available at www.cdc.gov/nchs/hus.htm. ■

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FDA: Reduce Radiation Exposure

The Food and Drug Administration has launched an initiative to reduce unnecessary radiation exposure from three types of medical imaging procedures: computed tomography, nuclear medicine studies, and fluoroscopy. The FDA said it will issue targeted requirements for device manufacturers to develop safer technologies and to provide training to support safe use. In addition, the agency said it will help develop a patient medical imaging history card for patients to track their own medical imaging history and share it with their physicians. The FDA also recommended that professional societies continue to develop diagnostic radiation reference levels for medical imaging procedures and increase their efforts to develop one or more national registries for radiation doses. "The goal of FDA's initiative is to support the benefits associated with medical imaging while minimizing the risks," Dr. Jeffrey Shuren, director of the FDA's Center for Devices and Radiological Health, said in a statement.

Cephalon Discloses MD Payments

Drug manufacturer Cephalon said it paid more than 900 physicians for speaking services or consulting in 2009. Most physicians received less than $10,000, while 17 earned more than $100,000, the drug company said in its online disclosure. Although the 2009 figures include only fees for speaking and consulting for Cephalon, the company said it has begun tracking other "items of value" it provides to health care professionals, including meals, educational items, and payments for research studies, and will disclose those online beginning in March 2011. In posting the payments online, Cephalon became the first drug manufacturer to report payments to physicians under a corporate integrity agreement with the Department of Justice. The 2008 agreement resulted from a $425 million settlement of charges that Cephalon marketed three drugs for unapproved uses. Other drug makers, including Pfizer Inc., will be disclosing payments to physicians under similar corporate integrity agreements.

FEMA Must Pay $475 Million to La.

A federal arbitration panel has ruled that the Federal Emergency Management Agency must pay nearly $475 million to replace Charity Hospital in New Orleans, which sustained massive damage in Hurricane Katrina. The panel's decision, which is binding, gave Louisiana nearly all the money it had requested and means the state can afford to build the new $1.2 billion academic medical center it wants to replace Charity Hospital. Louisiana officials had pressed FEMA for 4 years to agree to replace Charity rather than repair the facility, but FEMA had argued that the state could repair the hospital for much less money.

Report: U.S. Not Ready for Attack

The United States is unprepared for a major attack with biological weapons and has fallen behind in its capability to rapidly produce vaccines and therapeutics, which are essential for responding to a biological threat, a congressionally appointed commission said. "H1N1 came with months of warning. But even with time to prepare, the epidemic peaked before most Americans had access to vaccine. A bioattack will come with no such warning," said the report from the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism. The commission gave the government an "F" grade for failing to develop the capability to effectively counter a biological attack.

Baby Text Program Launched

Pregnant women and new mothers will receive text messages with health information and tips as part of a campaign sponsored by several government agencies, health insurers, and advocacy groups. The program, Text4baby, is the first-ever free national mobile health service in the United States, according to its sponsors. By texting BABY to 511411 (or BEBE for the Spanish version), women will receive three free texts per week, timed to their due date or baby's date of birth. The messages focus on a variety of topics, including birth defects prevention, immunization, nutrition, seasonal flu, mental health, oral health, and safe sleep, according to the program's sponsors, who note that they hope the program can help cut the infant mortality rate in the United States, which is one of the highest in the industrialized world.

More Americans Buy GI Drugs

Almost 10% of Americans purchased at least one prescription gastrointestinal drug in 2007, compared to fewer than 7% in 1997, according to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Total expenses for prescription GI drugs rose 170% in that decade, from $7 billion in 1997 to $18.9 billion in 2007. The total number of prescriptions filled increased from nearly 78 million in 1997 to more than 158 million in 2007, the report said. The average expenditure for a single gastrointestinal prescription drug increased from $90 to $120, and the average annual expense per person rose from $386 to $653 for those with at least one GI-related prescription.

—Jane Anderson