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Bill Would Boost Bone Health Efforts

Proposed federal legislation aims to create a national strategy against osteoporosis and other bone diseases. The Bone Health Promotion and Research Act (H.R. 3856) would expand research on osteoporosis at the National Institutes of Health, fund states' surveillance of bone conditions, and increase education activities at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The chief sponsors of the bill are Rep. Shelley Berkley (D-Nev.), who was diagnosed with osteoporosis more than a decade ago, and Rep. Michael C. Burgess (R-Tex.), a physician who has treated patients with that condition. "Osteoporosis and related bone diseases pose a public health issue of enormous proportions, affecting millions of Americans and costing billions of dollars," Rep. Burgess said in a statement. "The more we can do to promote and encourage education, awareness, research, and prevention, the better."

Call for Better Lupus Research

Federal agencies need to work closely with researchers, industry, and patient advocates to overcome barriers that have stymied new lupus treatments for decades, according to a new report commissioned by the Lupus Foundation of America. After a 9-month study, the Lewin Group advised researchers to work with the National Institutes of Health to create an agenda for drug development in lupus. Scientists also need to improve clinical trials' selection of participants, end points, and use of background medications and placebos, the report said. "The recommendations are a call to action requiring the efforts of all key stakeholders," Sandra C. Raymond, the foundation's president and CEO, said in a statement.

Everywhere, RH Work Challenges

In a recent worldwide survey, more than half of people with rheumatic diseases said that having a supportive boss and coworkers is the key to performing well in the workplace, with

flexible working hours also ranking high. The online survey was commissioned by the European League Against Rheumatism (EULAR). The survey included responses from 2,500 people with rheumatic disease, as well as health care providers and employers, in 79 countries. Nearly 70% of employers said that understanding the needs of patients with rheumatic diseases is a challenge, and only about a third of patients said that changes had been made to accommodate them at their workplaces. "We know that workers diagnosed with arthritis leave their jobs earlier than those without arthritis," Dr. John H. Klippel, president and CEO of the Arthritis Foundation, said in a statement. "Given the recession, any viable health care reform platform must ensure that our valuable workers stay healthy and stay on the job."

Noted Researcher Shulman Dies

Dr. Lawrence E. Shulman, the first director of the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases, died last month. He was 90. Dr. Shulman served as director of NIAMS from 1986 to 1994 and was known as a strong supporter of research into women's and minority health issues during his tenure. In 1974, he discovered and described eosinophilic fasciitis, the connective tissue disorder now known as Shulman's syndrome. Dr. Shulman served as president of the American Rheumatism Association, which is now the American College of Rheumatology, and was president of the Pan-American League Against Rheumatism. "We at NIAMS will always be indebted to Dr. Shulman for his tremendous vision and dedication to the institute and its public health mission, and he will be greatly missed by his many friends and colleagues," Dr. Stephen Katz, NIAMS director, said in a statement.

Middle Aged, Elders Are Bingeing

Findings from a survey of 11,000 adults aged 50 years or older have demonstrated that binge drinking of

alcohol is common. In all, 14% of men and 3% of women older than age 65 years reported having five or more drinks in a day within the past 30 days. Among 50- to 64-year-old adults, binge drinking was reported by 23% of men and 9% of women. In the study, published online in the American Journal of Psychiatry (doi:10.1176/appi.ajp.2009.09010016), the researchers analyzed data from the 2005 and 2006 installments of the National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Binge drinking in the over-50 male cohort was associated with higher income and being separated, divorced, or widowed. In both men and women, bingeing tracked with the use of tobacco and illicit drugs. The authors reported that binge drinking was not typically associated with psychological stress, so it might not be detected by typical alcohol screens. "Clinicians who work with this age group would be well advised to ask specifically about binge drinking," coauthor Dr. Dan G. Blazer of Duke University, Durham, N.C., said in a statement.

Practice Revenues Decline

Medical practice revenues fell in 2008, possibly because of declining patient volumes and payments from people in financial hardship, according to the Medical Group Management Association. Medical practices responded by trimming overhead costs more than 1%, but that wasn't enough to offset shrinking revenues, the MGMA found in its yearly practice-cost survey. Multispecialty group practices saw a 1.9% decline in total medical revenue in 2008, with substantial drops in both the number of procedures and the number of patients. Bad debt in multispecialty group practices from fee-for-service charges increased 13% from 2006 to 2008. Practices trimmed their expenses mostly by cutting support-staff costs. However, total worker count remained unchanged over the study period, suggesting that medical practices may have eliminated raises and bonuses or even cut pay to avoid laying off employees, the MGMA said.

—Mary Ellen Schneider

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