POLICY & PRACTICE

TNF-α Inhibitors Are Top Choice

Tumor necrosis factor–α inhibitors are likely to continue to dominate the rheumatoid arthritis marketplace, according to the results of a survey of 102 rheumatologists conducted by Decision Resources. Almost all reported prescribing TNF-α inhibitors as a first-line biologic therapy. Most reported trying two or more TNF-α inhibitors before trying a treatment with a different mechanism of action. Physicians said they preferred TNF-α inhibitors because they were familiar with the drugs and these drugs were effective in treating RA. The class of drugs is expected to get a boost with the upcoming launch of two new drugs—certolizumab pegol (Cimzia) and golimumab, according to Decision Resources. "Most rheumatologists expect the dominance of TNF-α inhibitors to continue, and possibly expand, over the next 2 years," Decision Resources director Cindy Mundy, Ph.D., said in a statement. "Following the launches of Cimzia and golimumab, nearly half of surveyed rheumatologists expect to prescribe three or more TNF-α inhibitors before moving to a different class of agents."

New Leadership at NIAMS

Dr. Robert H. Carter, a leading researcher and rheumatologist, will become the new deputy director of the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), part of the National Institutes of Health, this fall. Dr. Carter is a former director of the division of clinical immunology and rheumatology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and is the principal investigator of the university's NIAMS-supported Rheumatic Disease Core Center. In his new role, Dr. Carter will assist in developing the NIAMS portfolio of research from basic science to translational research. "His stellar credentials as a scientist and his broad experience in NIH extramural activities will contribute to NIAMS' long history of excellence in biomedical research," Dr. Stephen Katz, NIAMS director, said in a statement.

Health Searches Level Off

The number of adults going online for health information has plateaued or declined, according to a Harris Interactive poll. According to the pollster, a total of 150 million people—66% of all adults and 81% of those who have online access—said they obtained health information from the Internet in 2008. That represents a slight drop from 2007, when the poll found that 160 million people reported obtaining health information online. The researchers who conducted the poll noted that the slight differences from 2007 to 2008 are within the possible sampling error. But they pointed out that, in contrast to other years, it appears that there has been no increase in the total number of people with Internet access or in the number of people searching for health information—those the poll calls "cybercondriacs"—indicating that a plateau or even a slight decline was underway. Just under half of cybercondriacs said that they had discussed the information they obtained online with their doctors, and 49% had gone online to look for information as a result of discussions with their doctors, the survey found.

Home Drug Errors Rise

A shift in the number of medications being taken outside of the hospital has correlated with a sharp increase in the number of fatal medication errors in the home, researchers reported in the Archives of Internal Medicine. In the study, sociologists at the University of California, San Diego, found a 3,196% increase in fatal domestic medication errors involving alcohol and/or street drugs, and a 564% increase in domestic medication fatalities not involving alcohol and/or street drugs. The study examined nearly 50 million U.S. death certificates from 1983 to 2004, and focused on the 200,000 deaths involving medication errors. The authors said they noted that it may be possible to reduce fatal medication errors by focusing education efforts on domestic settings in addition to clinical settings.

GAO: Part D Problems Continue

Almost 3 years after the Medicare Part D drug program went into effect, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services still faces significant and continuing problems resolving beneficiaries' complaints and grievances, a Government Accountability Office report found. GAO said that there have been 630,000 complaints filed with the CMS against drug plans since Part D went into effect, most involving problems of enrollment and disenrollment. Although GAO found that the number of complaints, and the time to resolve them, had declined in the first 2 years of the program, it also found that "a substantial proportion of the most critical complaints—those filed when beneficiaries were at risk of exhausting their medications—were not resolved within CMS's applicable time frames."

—Mary Ellen Schneider