

POLICY & PRACTICE

Fate of Frozen Embryos Explored

Couples undergoing fertility treatment would rather store their cryopreserved embryos for future pregnancy attempts or donate them for research than discard them or give them to another couple, according to a survey of more than 1,000 individuals whose embryos had been preserved. However, not all couples are able to take advantage of the option of donating their embryos for research. Restrictions on the use of federal funding in the destruction of embryos and some

state laws banning embryo research have limited the availability of this option, according to the study authors. Slightly more than half of respondents said they would be very likely to store the embryos so they could have another child, and 21% said they would be very likely to donate the embryos for research; only 7% of survey respondents said they would be very likely to donate their unused embryos to others trying to have a baby, and only 6% said they would be very likely to thaw and dispose of the excess embryos.

Give the Gift of Women's Health

Planned Parenthood of Indiana has stirred up controversy by offering holiday gift certificates for services at its centers. The gift certificates can be purchased online in \$25 increments. The idea is to help the 800,000 uninsured residents of the state who struggle to afford basic health services, according to Betty Cockrum, president and CEO of the state group. However, the gift certificates can also be used by people with insurance to help offset the cost of copayments or uncovered medications. "The gift certificates are also a wonderful idea for that person

in your life who puts everyone else first and has been putting off taking care of her or his own health," Ms. Cockrum said in a statement announcing the program. The program has raised the ire of antiabortion groups, as the certificates can be used for any service offered at the health centers, including abortion.

Defensive Medicine \$1.4B in Mass.

Defensive medicine—physicians ordering tests, procedures, referrals, hospitalizations, or prescriptions because of fear of being sued—is widespread and adds a minimum of \$1.4 billion per year to the cost of health care in Massachusetts, according to a physician survey conducted by the Massachusetts Medical Society. The physicians' group said that defensive practices also reduce access to care and may be unsafe for patients. The survey queried nearly 900 physicians in eight specialties between November 2007 and April 2008 about their use of seven tests and procedures. Of the respondents, 83% said they practice defensive medicine. The survey also found that 13% of hospitalizations and 18%-28% of various tests, procedures, referrals, and consultations were ordered for defensive reasons. The society said that patients are unnecessarily exposed to radiation and possible severe allergic reactions when subjected to tests ordered for defensive purposes.

Group Calls for Cancer Action

A coalition of cancer organizations has put together a six-item to-do list for the incoming Obama administration. The tasks include increasing the availability of vaccines shown to prevent cancer-causing infections, promoting culturally sensitive risk reduction and education campaigns, and investing in cancer research and access to prevention and early detection. In addition, the coalition urged the new president to commit to a comprehensive tobacco control program within the United States, ratify an international tobacco-control treaty, and support efforts by non-governmental organizations to assist cancer survivors. The aim of the plan is to reverse the growing global cancer burden, according to the coalition. Although cancer incidence and deaths are declining in the United States, the global rate of cancer is projected to rise about 1% each year.

Workers Have Uninsured Children

Approximately 8.6 million children in the United States are uninsured, and most of these are in working families, according to a report from the advocacy group Families USA. In fact, almost 90% of uninsured children are in families where one parent works, and more than two-thirds live in households where at least one family member works full-time, year-round. The report, based on new Census Bureau data from 2005 through 2007, does not reflect the worsening economic situation in 2008, Families USA Executive Director Ron Pollack said at a press briefing. Mr. Pollack said the report points out the need for Congress to move quickly to pass legislation to reauthorize and expand the State Children's Health Insurance Program, now scheduled to expire on March 31.

—Mary Ellen Schneider



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