

POLICY & PRACTICE

Depression Guidance Needed

Heart disease patients are often depressed, and at an increased risk of events, and yet cardiologists don't have guidance to help them identify and treat depressed patients, according to a new report by a National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute task force, "Assessment and Treatment of Depression in Patients With Cardiovascular Disease." The group outlined treatment options and made recommendations on how to more uniformly assess depression. Most therapies found to be effective in patients without heart disease "will likely also reduce de-

pression in [coronary heart disease] patients," said the report. The panel also recommended randomized trials to assess whether drug therapy or psychotherapy can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease events and mortality associated with depression in heart disease patients.

Triglyceride Danger Not Understood

Americans—even those under a physician's care for dyslipidemia or diabetes—are unaware of the dangers posed by triglycerides, according to a Harris Interactive survey conducted for the National

Lipid Association. Harris queried 2,089 adults and 510 physicians—205 primary care physicians, 155 cardiologists, and 150 endocrinologists. One in five consumers said they were knowledgeable about lipids, but fewer than one in five knew the safe levels of LDL cholesterol, HDL cholesterol, and triglycerides. One-fifth said they were the ones who initiated a discussion about lipids, and that most physician discussions lasted less than 5 minutes; fewer than one-third said the talks were "clear." Physicians, however, believed they were the initiators. Triglycerides are discussed less than any other lipid topic, the survey found.

J&J Suit on Guidant Sale

Johnson & Johnson is suing Boston Scientific, seeking \$5.5 billion in damages relating to Boston Scientific's acquisition of Guidant. J&J had been a Guidant suitor. The lawsuit was filed in the U.S. District Court for Southern New York and alleges that Guidant leaked confidential information that allowed Boston Scientific to make a superior offer to the J&J bid. The suit also names Abbott Laboratories, which it says was a party to the leak, allowing it to separately purchase Guidant's vascular and endovascular businesses. Boston Scientific completed its \$27 billion purchase of the rest of Guidant's business in April. In a statement, Boston Scientific senior vice president Paul Donovan said the suit is without merit, adding, "Throughout this process, we complied with all the terms of the J&J/Guidant merger agreement."

Reporting on Quality

More than 3,300 hospitals around the country have reported data on quality measures to Medicare and consumers, according to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Of the 3,490 acute care hospitals eligible to participate in the federal program that links payments to hospitals to reporting of quality measures, 99% opted to report data. Under the program, hospitals that submit quality information to CMS are eligible to receive the full 2% payment update for inpatient services in 2007 under Medicare, while those who do not report will see a 2% payment reduction next year. "This is more evidence that paying for reporting and improving quality can help patients get better care," Dr. Mark McClellan, outgoing CMS administrator said in a statement. "Consumers can use this information to evaluate care and doctors and hospitals can use it to help improve their performance." For 2007, CMS officials have added 11 measures for hospital reporting, bringing the total number of hospital performance measures to 21.

Low Physician E-Mail Use

Physicians are rarely using e-mail to communicate with patients, according to one study, and yet, patients overwhelmingly say they'd like to use the technology to talk with their doctors and receive test results, according to a poll. The Center for Studying Health System Change found that only 24% of physicians used e-mail to discuss a clinical issue with a patient during 2004-2005, a 4% increase from the previous study in 2000-2001. Almost half of physicians in academic and staff or group HMO practices use e-mail for clinical discussions, compared with 20% in practices of 10 or fewer. Physicians in nonmetropolitan areas, or who have large numbers of Medicaid and/or Medicare patients, are less likely to use e-mail because of patients' lack of access to the technology. Reasons for not using e-mail include lack of reimbursement for consultations, cost of implementing a secure system, and fears that e-mail will add to workloads. A recent Wall Street Journal-Harris Interactive poll of 2,624 adults found that 74% want to communicate directly with doctors by e-mail and 67% said they want to receive test results by e-mail.

—Alicia Ault

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