POLICY & PRACTICE

Uninsured Figures Climb

The number of people in the United States without health insurance edged higher in 2005, fueled in part by a drop in employer-sponsored health insurance, according to figures released in August from the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2005, 46.6 million people were uninsured, up from 45.3 million the year before. The percentage of people covered by employer-sponsored health insurance dropped from 59.8% to 59.5% between 2004 and 2005, while the percentage covered by government insurance stayed the same, according to the census figures. The new figures, compiled as part of the Current Population Survey, showed that the number of uninsured children also increased. Between 2004 and 2005, the number of uninsured children rose from 7.9 million to 8.3 million. And children living in poverty were the most likely to be uninsured, with the uninsured rate in 2005 at 19% for children living in poverty, compared with 11.2% of children overall. The American Medical Association issued a statement calling for action to address the uninsured problem. "The AMA plan for reducing the number of the uninsured advocates expanded coverage and choice through a system of refundable tax credits based on income, individually selected and owned health insurance, and market reforms that will enhance new, affordable insurance options," Dr. Ardis Hoven, an AMA board member, said in a statement.

Teen Risky Behavior Declines

Over the past 15 years, fewer U.S. high school students have been engaging in sexual behaviors that would put them at risk for HIV, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The percentage of high school students who reported ever having had sexual intercourse dropped from 1991 to 2005, along with the percentage of students reporting multiple sexual partners and current sexual activity, the CDC reported in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. For example, the prevalence of multiple sexual partners among U.S. high school students decreased 24% from 1991 to 2005, dropping from 18.7% to 14.3%. In addition, condom use is on the rise among U.S. teens. The CDC found that among currently sexually active students, condom use increased from 46.2% in 1991 to 62.8% in 2005, or about a 36% increase. Officials at the CDC analyzed data from eight national Youth Risk Behavior Surveys.

WIC Would Add Vegetables, Fruits

More vegetables, fruits, and whole grains would be available to beneficiaries of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, under a proposal issued last month by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Based in large part on the findings of Institute of Medicine report published last year, the proposed rules would promote greater consistency with established dietary guidelines for infants and children under age 2 years, and would better support breast-feeding, according to USDA. Current WIC-covered foods help increase beneficiaries' intake of protein, iron, calcium, vitamin A, and vitamin C—nutrients that were found lacking in the WIC population when the program was started in 1974, USDA said. When drafting the proposal, USDA used guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, as well as the IOM report. The department is taking comments until Nov. 6.

Medicare Proposes 5.1% Pay Cut

Unless Congress intervenes by the end of the year, physicians are scheduled to face a 5.1% cut in Medicare payments starting Jan. 1, 2007. Officials at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services published the proposed physician fee schedule changes in the Aug. 22 issue of the Federal Register; the final regulation is expected in the fall. The proposed cut, which comes on the heels of years of pay freezes and minor increases, will have a significant impact on pediatricians since most major payers and the majority of state Medicaid programs base their payments on the Medicare physician fee schedule, said Dr. Richard H. Tuck, the American Academy of Pediatrics' representative on the American Medical Association's Relative Value Update Committee. The RUC makes annual payment recommendations to CMS. The proposed payment cut comes just a few weeks after CMS officials announced plans to change the way Medicare pays for evaluation and management services, with physicians who provide more cognitive services getting a bigger piece of the Medicare pie. Under that proposal, pediatricians who see Medicare beneficiaries are expected to see a 2% increase in allowed charges under Medicare, compared with 2006. But the proposed overall payment cut is likely to neutralize much of that increase, Dr. Tuck said.

—From staff reports