POLICY & PRACTICE

Imaging Accreditation

The Intersocietal Commission for the Accreditation of Magnetic Resonance Laboratories (ICAMRL) has expanded its program to include accreditation for body, cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, and neurologic imaging. The revised accreditation process, which went into effect Nov. 1, was instituted because of widespread interest from neurologists, cardiologists, orthopedic surgeons, radiologists, and others. "It is crucial to the future of this imaging modality that all specialties have access to a fair and equitable accreditation program that enables them to receive peer review of their work and to document to insurers that they are providing quality magnetic resonance studies consistent with established clinical guidelines," ICAMRL President Edward T. Martin, M.D., said in a statement. Labs can apply in any or all of the specialty areas. In addition, the ICAMRL process enables labs using extremity-only magnets to apply for accreditation.

New Neuroscience Site Coming

The National Institutes of Health is developing a Neuroscience Information Framework to provide information for neuroscientists. The framework, which will be accessible through the Internet, will provide links to neuroscience databases, results of neuroscience-related trials, and tools for exploring information about the brain. It will be designed by a consortium led by Cornell University's Weill Medical College. "Our goal is to make scientific data and findings available in order to help further research and promote a greater understanding of brain function and disease," said Daniel Gardner, Ph.D., principal investigator for the initiative and head of the neuroinformatics laboratory at the medical college. The framework will be supported through a $550,000 grant for the first 15 months, followed by a $1.1-million grant for the second phase.

Autism and Genetics

Five institutes at the National Institutes of Health and three private organizations have formed a consortium to identify genes that may contribute to the development of autism and autism spectrum disorders. The consortium has funded five grants totaling $10.8 million, to be given out over a 5-year period. "This initiative seeks to expand our knowledge of the genetic factors involved in this disorder that affects so many families," said Thomas R. Insel, director of the National Institute of Mental Health, one of the consortium members. The other members from NIH are the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The private organizations are the National Alliance for Autism Research, Cure Autism Now, and the Southwest Autism Research and Resource Center.

Improving End-of-Life Care

The nation's approach to end-of-life care needs to change, according to a new report from the Hastings Center. "In the modern acute care hospital, virtually everything is oriented toward using life-sustaining equipment and techniques, not toward forgoing them," Thomas H. Murray and Bruce Jennings wrote. "The informal culture of specialty medicine, the reward system, the institutional pressures faced by family members, the range of choices people in extremis are being asked to make—each of these factors and more make up a system that is remarkably resistant to change." Mr. Murray and Mr. Jennings recommend integrating advance directives more fully into patient care and paying more attention to the appropriate role of patients' family members in surrogate decision making. The report is available online at www.thehastingscenter.org/default.asp.

DTC Ad Guidelines Draw Criticism

Voluntary guidelines for direct-to-consumer (DTC) prescription drug advertising released by the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America have drawn criticism from politicians and consumer groups who say they don't go far enough. "While I wish the PhRMA guidelines would have gone farther and proposed a moratorium on DTC advertising of newly approved drugs, I hope individual pharmaceutical manufacturers will seriously consider such a measure," Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, M.D. (R-Tenn.), said in a statement. Sidney Wolfe, M.D., director of the Public Citizen Health Research Group, called the PhRMA announcement "a meaningless attempt to fool people into believing the guidelines are stronger than they really are." The guidelines, which more than 20 companies have signed onto, are available online at www.phrma.org/publications/policy//2005-08-02.1194.pdf.

—Joyce Frieden