

POLICY & PRACTICE

Call for Hearing on Tanning Beds

Members of the U.S. House of Representatives are calling for hearings on the existing federal warning language on tanning beds, saying that it does not sufficiently explain the risks, including the potential for skin cancer. Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.), Ginny Brown-Waite (R-Fla.), Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), and Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) asked the House Energy and Commerce Committee's subcommittee on health to consider the Tanning Accountability and Notification Act (H.R. 4767), which was introduced in February by Rep. Maloney and Rep. Brown-Waite, and would require the Food and Drug Administration to survey consumers about their understanding of the risks. The legislation has been backed by the American Academy of Dermatology. In a statement, Dr. Stephen P. Stone, AAD president, noted, "With the number of skin cancer cases rising in this country each year, especially among young adults, the academy supports this effort to ensure that the current warning labels attached to indoor tanning devices are accurately and fully conveying the adverse events and risks to those using the equipment."

Psoriasis Biologics Coverage in CA

After a year of discussion, Blue Shield of California has agreed to recommendations by the National Psoriasis Foundation to loosen restrictions on biologic therapies for patients with psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis. The foundation estimates that as many as 17,600 of the Blue Shield's 3.2 million members have moderate to severe disease that might require a biologic agent. Under the previous policy, patients could not get a biologic unless at least 30% of their body surface area was affected, and they had already failed two traditional systemic treatments and phototherapy, said Sheila Rittenberg, who is director of advocacy at the National Psoriasis Foundation. Now, the requirements have been lowered to 13% surface area coverage, failure of one systemic therapy, and intolerance, failure, or difficulty accessing phototherapy. Blue Shield's old policy was among the most restrictive in the nation, according to the foundation. The advent of biologics has been a double-edged sword—they are expensive, but they've also put psoriasis on clinicians' and insurers' radar screens, said Ms. Rittenberg. "Now people are paying attention because somebody's got to pay the bill," she said.

Survey: FDA Influenced by Politics

A majority of Americans—82%—believe the Food and Drug Administration is greatly influenced by politics when making decisions about the safety and efficacy of new prescription drugs, according to a Wall Street Journal online Harris Interactive poll. The finding was similar across parties, with 87% of Democrats, 77% of Republicans, and 88% of Independents saying they thought that politics outweighed science greatly or to some extent in decision making. The survey of more than 2,300 adults was conducted in mid-May. In addition, almost 60% of respondents said the agency is doing a fair or poor job in ensuring the safety and efficacy of new drugs. Only 36% said the FDA

was doing an excellent or good job. That is a reversal from 2 years ago, when 56% had a positive view, and 37% a negative view, of the FDA. Most of those polled said FDA advisory panel members should not be allowed to have consulting agreements with, or stock in, drug companies. But Americans showed their tendency to want it all, too. When asked how important it is to have access to new drugs, no matter the cost, 71% said very or somewhat; 93% said the same about getting access to affordable drugs, 72% to experimental drugs without proven safety or efficacy if they offer a choice when there are no other options, and 94% to getting complete safety information.

Sunscreen Ads Fail to Reach Men

Advertisements for sun-protection products are targeted primarily at women, and are failing to reach men, travelers, outdoors enthusiasts, and others at high risk for sun exposure, according to a review of such advertisements published in the May/June issue of the American Journal of Health Promotion. Researchers from Boston University, the Cancer Research Center of Hawaii, and the Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System reviewed May-September issues of 24 magazines published from 1997 to 2002. The magazines included the top sellers for women, men, teens, parents, travelers, and outdoor enthusiasts. In the 579 issues reviewed, there were 783 ads for products ranging from sunscreens to self-tanning products to moisturizers and cosmetics with SPF. Seventy-seven percent of the ads appeared in women's magazines, with at least four ads in each issue, compared with less than one ad in every issue of a parent or family magazine, and less than one ad in every six issues of outdoors magazines. The majority of the ads running in women's magazines were for cosmetics or moisturizers that contained sun protection. The authors noted that over the study period, the number of ads for those types of products skyrocketed while traditional sunscreen ads declined. That trend is disturbing because the cosmetics ads don't mention the need to use the products before sun exposure or to reapply after exercise or swimming, said the researchers.

ICD-10 Fraud Concerns

The Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association and the Medical Group Management Association are among those objecting to the planned implementation of ICD-10, the newest version of the comprehensive list of diagnostic billing codes used by health care providers. A bill currently being considered in the House would require payers to switch from the current ICD-9 codes to ICD-10 by Oct. 1, 2009. Blue Cross/Blue Shield argued in a statement that the deadline should be pushed back to 2012 "because much has to be done before a switch to ICD-10 can be started ... and providers need time to automate their offices and be trained." The Blues are particularly concerned because the switch comes at the same time that Medicare is shrinking the number of its claims processors—many of which are Blues plans—from 50 to 15.

—Alicia Ault

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