Policy & Practice

Stem Cell Committee Named

The Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council, two divisions of the National Academies, have appointed a committee to "monitor and revise" voluntary guidelines on the conduct of human embryonic stem cell research. The committee will provide updates to the voluntary guidelines issued last year by the National Academies; it is currently seeking comments on the guidelines. It also will have workshops to keep informed about developments in the field. The 14-member committee will be cochaired by R. Alta Charo, professor of law and bioethics at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and Richard O. Hynes, Ph.D., investigator at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and professor of cancer research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge. The Ellison Medical Foundation, the Greenwall Foundation, and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute will provide funding for the committee.

Medicare Trustees Report

The federal Hospital Insurance Trust Fund—better known as Medicare Part A—is not adequately funded to meet the needs of future beneficiaries, according to the annual report of the Social Security and Medicare trustees. "The Hospital Insurance Trust Fund is not adequately financed over the next 10 years," the report said. "From the beginning of 2006 to the end of 2015, the assets of the Hospital Insurance Trust Fund are projected to decrease from $286 billion to $197 billion, which would be less than the recommended minimum level of 1 year's expenditures." The trustees added that "the financial outlook for the Medicare program continues to raise serious concerns." Total expenditures under Medicare were $336 billion in 2005 and are expected to grow faster than the economy, the trustees' report said. They added that "growth of this magnitude, if realized, would still substantially increase the strain on the nation's workers, Medicare beneficiaries, and the federal budget." Senate Majority Leader Dr. Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) took an upbeat approach to the report, pointing out that it showed that the costs of the new Medicare prescription drug benefit are significantly lower than cited in previous reports. "However, the trustees also make it clear that much work remains to be done to address the growth of Medicare spending," he said in a statement. The American Medical Association focused on the report's projected "steep long-term cuts" in Medicare payments to physicians. "[This] report on the dire future of Medicare cries out for reforms to ensure that Medicare will be there for future generations," Dr. Duane Cady, chair of the AMA board of trustees, said in a statement. "Congress must take an immediate step to preserve seniors' access to physicians by tying Medicare physician payments to the cost of caring for seniors."

Uninsured Get Inefficient Care

The uninsured not only face a "downward spiral" in health, they also experience inefficiencies in care, a new report from the Commonwealth Fund found. Uninsured persons are more likely to go without the care or screening tests that could prevent more serious health problems, according to the report. They also are less likely to have a regular doctor (41% vs. 86% of insured adults) and are more likely to face fragmented care. "Nearly one-quarter (23%) of adults who are currently uninsured or had a time uninsured reported that test results of records were not available at the time of a doctor's appointment, compared with 15% of insured adults. Nearly one-fifth (19%) of uninsured adults had duplicate tests ordered, compared with 10% of insured adults," the study said. Researchers found that an "alarmingly high proportion (59%) of adults" with chronic illnesses such as diabetes and asthma who were uninsured for a time in the past year went without their medications because they couldn't afford them. The findings come from the Commonwealth Fund Biennial Health Insurance Survey, a nationally representative sample of 4,350 U.S. adults aged 19 years and older, which was conducted via phone in August 2005-January 2006. This analysis focuses on the population aged 19-64 years.

Maryland Passes Stem Cell Bill

The Maryland legislature passed a bill establishing a $15 million fund to promote stem cell research in the state. The measure, which passed by a vote of 90-48 and was signed by Republican Gov. Robert Ehrlich last month, will establish procedures for reviewing research projects involving either adult or embryonic stem cells. An independent commission—including representatives from the patient advocate, biotechnology, and ethics communities—will administer grants to universities and private sector researchers. This law will make Maryland a leader in medical research, Gov. Ehrlich said.

—Joyce Frieden