

Deficit Reduction Act May Harm Medicaid Patients

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BALTIMORE — Provisions in the Deficit Reduction Act are likely to profoundly affect health care for Medicaid patients, Cindy Mann said at the annual meeting of the American Society for Law, Medicine, and Ethics.

The Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) of 2005, signed into law last February by President Bush, includes “the most significant statutory changes in the Medicaid program arguably since the late 1980s,” said Ms. Mann, who is a research professor at Georgetown University Health Policy Institute in Washington. “It really is also the first time that Congress has legislated some specific cutbacks aimed at beneficiaries.”

Keeping Health Data Private in Emergency

The Department of Health and Human Services has developed a Web-based decision tool to assist emergency preparedness and help recovery planners use health information while complying with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 Privacy Rule.

The tool is aimed at meeting the needs of elderly or disabled persons during and after evacuation. To access the tool, go to www.hhs.gov/ocr/hipaa/decisiontool. ■

INDEX OF ADVERTISERS

Abbott Laboratories	
TriCor	5-6
Forest Pharmaceuticals, Inc.	
Lexapro	22a-22b
Namenda	41-44
GELITA Health Initiative	
Collagen Hydrolysate	54a-54b
Eli Lilly and Company	
Cymbalta	59-60
Merck & Co., Inc.	
Januvia	6a-6b
Zostavax	46a-46d
Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corporation	
Diovan	21-22
Novartis Vaccines	
Corporate	49
Novo Nordisk Inc.	
Novolog 70/30 Mix	27-28
Levemir	45-46
Ortho-McNeil Neurologics	
Topamax	12-14
Pfizer Inc.	
Lyrica	3
Chantix	25-26
Caduet	30-33
Viagra	37-38
Sanofi Aventis	
Apidra	14a-14b
Corporate	52-53
Sanofi Pasteur Inc.	
ADACEL	34a-34b
Sepracor Inc.	
Lunesta	38a-38b
Takeda Pharmaceuticals North America, Inc.	
Corporate	9
Amitiza	17-20
Rozerem	56-58
Wyeth Pharmaceuticals Inc.	
Effexor XR	10a-10d, 50a-50d

Many changes deal with Medicaid coverage requirements for states. The law “gives [states] very broad flexibility to move away from what has been a system of mandatory and optional benefits to a system of benchmark benefits,” said Ms. Mann, who is also executive director of the Center for Children and Families at Georgetown. “One benchmark [states can use] is any state employee plan—not the one most used in your state, or the one that has the highest enrollment of dependents,

it’s any state employee plan that’s offered.”

States could even construct a special plan just to be a benchmark and then offer it to state employees, “and that becomes [the] standard,” she said, at the meeting cosponsored by the University of Maryland.

The other way states can formulate an acceptable plan is by getting the approval of the federal Health and Human Services secretary. The two state plan amendments now approved under the DRA—West Virginia and Kentucky—used the secretary-

approved coverage option, she noted.

DRA also allows states to change benefit packages for some groups and not others, Ms. Mann said. “[States] could have one benchmark package in a rural area of the state and a different one for urban areas. It opens it up to any slice and dice a state decides it wants to do in terms of how it constructs these benchmark packages and to whom they will apply.”

A controversial change imposed by the DRA is a requirement that anyone apply-

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