POLICY & PRACTICE

New FDA Women's Health Director

Kathleen Uhl, M.D., has been named director of the Office of Women's Health at the Food and Drug Administration. Dr. Uhl, a family physician and a captain in the U.S. Public Health Service, most recently served as a supervisory medical officer in the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research. "Kathleen brings a breadth of professional experience, as well as a strong science background and passion for women's health, to her new position," said FDA Acting Commissioner Andrew von Eschenbach, M.D. Dr. Uhl's experience includes clinical practice, basic science and clinical research, drug application review, drug safety oversight, and women's health issues. Dr. Uhl also has dual faculty appointments at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in family medicine and in internal medicine.

Alternative Hormone Therapies

The FDA recently sent warning letters to 16 dietary supplement and hormone cream manufacturers for making unproven claims about their products. The companies were marketing their products as "alternative hormone therapy" for treating or preventing serious diseases including cancer, heart disease, and osteoporosis. In conjunction with the FDA's effort, the Federal Trade Commission is issuing letters to 34 Web sites that are making similar claims about "alternative hormone therapy" products. "FDA takes seriously its responsibility to protect consumers from products promoted with unproven claims," Margaret O'K. Glavin, associate commissioner for regulatory affairs, said in a statement. "It's particularly troublesome when these claims provide false hope to patients with serious or life-threatening conditions."

Trends in Prenatal Care

Nearly 84% of mothers began prenatal care in the first trimester of pregnancy in 2004, according to figures from the National Center for Health Statistics. That figure did not rise between 2003 and 2004 after more than a decade of increases in first-trimester prenatal care. Also in 2004, the percentage of women who did not begin prenatal care until the last trimester, or who had no care, increased from 3.56% in 2003 to 3.59% in 2004. The data are based on a 41-state reporting area. Preliminary U.S. birth data from the National Center for Health Statistics also shows that the percentage of infants delivered at less than 37 weeks' gestation rose to 12.5% in 2004 from 11.6% in 2000 and 10.6% in 1990.

Misusing Research Findings

In the debate over reproductive health issues, policymakers need to beware of faulty science and advocates who misuse research findings, according to an article in the November issue of the Guttmacher Report on Public Policy. Policymakers should put stock in the scientific process—peer-review and published research methodology—not just in individuals or organizations with a similar ideology. For example, scientific reviews in 2003 and 2004 show there is no evidence linking abortion and breast cancer but many abortion opponents continue to rely on discredited studies to support legislation that requires that women be told of a link, according to the article. "Far too often in the uproar over sexual and reproductive health issues, the protections built into the scientific process are simply ignored," wrote Adam Sonfield, the article author and an associate at the Guttmacher Institute.

Switch to Electronic Records

Physicians too nervous to convert their offices to electronic health records can start with "baby steps" to make it less intimidating, Daniel Sands, M.D., said at a health care congress sponsored by the Wall Street Journal and CNBC. Physicians are often reluctant to leap into an EHR system because of its complexity and the expense involved, said Dr. Sands of Harvard University, Boston. One idea is to use electronic communications with patients and staff instead of using handwritten phone messages. "A simple step like that is a good way to get people engaged with technology."

—Mary Ellen Schneider

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