

POLICY & PRACTICE

Federally Funded Disinformation?

Many federally funded crisis pregnancy centers or pregnancy resource centers provide pregnant women with misleading information about the risks of abortion, according to a report from the Democratic staff of the House Committee on Government Reform. Investigators working for the committee called 25 federally funded crisis pregnancy centers and posed as pregnant 17-year-olds trying to decide whether to have an abortion. Of the 23 centers that were reached by investigators, 20 (87%) provided medically inaccurate in-

formation about the health effects of abortion, including about the link between abortion and breast cancer, the effect of abortion on fertility, and the mental health effects of abortion. Since 2001, the federal government has spent more than \$30 million to fund these centers, according to the report.

Relief Sought on Imaging Pay Cuts

With Medicare due to slash payments for imaging services by 35%-55% in January 2007, provider organizations are rallying to delay or repeal the cuts, which call for pay-

ments for the technical component—equipment, supplies, and overhead for imaging services—to be reimbursed at the hospital outpatient payment rate if it is lower than the physician fee schedule. At a hearing of the House Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee, Democrats and Republicans said they were concerned the reductions were enacted without public input and without any assessment of the impact on beneficiaries. The cuts were inserted into the Deficit Reduction Act during a House-Senate conference; the act was signed in February 2006. H.R. 5704, sponsored by Rep. Joseph Pitts (R-Penn.), would institute a 2-year moratorium, and Rep.

Carolyn McCarthy (D-N.Y.) has introduced a bill that would repeal the cuts (H.R. 5238). At the hearing, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists also urged Congress to exempt ultrasound performed in the physician's office from proposals that would place restrictions on the use of imaging, such as requiring accreditation standards. Dr. Douglas W. Laube, ACOG president, told that congressional committee that ob.gyns. are well trained to perform ultrasound and that the diagnostic test increases the quality of clinical care and ultimately results in cost savings.

Genetic Testing Specialty Urged

Officials at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services should establish a genetic testing specialty under the Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments (CLIA) of 1998, according to a coalition of 14 women's health groups. In a letter to CMS Administrator Mark McClellan, the groups urged him to move forward with a Notice of Intent of proposed rulemaking issued in 2000 on the development of a genetic testing specialty. The science is outpacing the current regulations, the groups wrote. Currently there are about 1,000 tests for genetic diseases available clinically and several hundred more under development. Signatories to the letter include the Association for Reproductive Health Professionals, the Reproductive Health Technologies Project, and the Society for Women's Health Research.

HIV Vaccine Research Gets \$287M

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has awarded \$287 million to researchers in an effort to accelerate development of an HIV vaccine. The sum will fund 16 grants to more than 165 investigators from around the world. "Some of the vaccine concepts that will be pursued have been talked about for years, but have never been adequately studied," Dr. Nicholas Hellmann, acting director of the Gates Foundation's HIV, TB, and Reproductive Health program, said in a statement. "If successful, they could lead to entirely new paradigms for HIV vaccine development."

'Wal-Mart Bill' Overturned in Court

A federal judge last month overturned a Maryland law that would have required for-profit companies with 10,000 or more employees to spend at least 8% of total employee wages on health insurance costs or pay the same amount to the state. The law was directed at Wal-Mart. The judge threw out the law, which would have gone into effect in January, on the grounds that it violated the federal Employment Retirement Income Security Act of 1974. The court's decision was praised by the Retail Industry Leaders Association, which brought the suit, saying the court's decision spared national companies from facing a "costly patchwork" of state and local regulation of health plans. The group has also filed suit in an effort to overturn a similar law passed in Suffolk County in New York State. In a statement, Paul Blank, campaign director for WakeUpWalMart.com, said the group is disappointed by the court's decision, which "ignores the strong public support for requiring large, profitable corporations to pay their fair share for health care."

—Mary Ellen Schneider

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