POLICY & PRACTICE

Uninsured Figures Climb

The number of people in the United States without health insurance edged higher in 2005, fueled in part by a drop in employer-sponsored health insurance, according to figures released in August from the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2005, 46.6 million people were uninsured, up from 45.3 million the year before. The percentage of people covered by employer-sponsored health insurance dropped from 59.8% to 59.5% between 2004 and 2005, while the percentage covered by government insurance stayed the same, according to the Census figures. The new figures, compiled as part of the Current Population Survey, showed that the number of uninsured children also increased. Between 2004 and 2005, the number of uninsured children rose from 7.9 million to 8.3 million. And children living in poverty were the most likely to be uninsured, with the uninsured rate at 19% for children living in poverty, compared with 11.2% of children overall in 2005. The American Medical Association issued a statement calling for action to address the uninsured problem. "The AMA plan for reducing the number of the uninsured advocates expanded coverage and choice through a system of refundable tax credits based on income, individually selected and owned health insurance, and market reforms that will enhance new, affordable insurance options," Dr. Ardis Hoven, an AMA board member, said in a statement.

Part D Premiums Hold Steady

Premiums under Medicare's Part D drug benefit will remain stable in 2007, according to figures released last month by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Officials at CMS estimate that the average monthly premium paid by Medicare Part D beneficiaries will be about $24 in 2007, nearly the same as in 2006. "Competition and choice in health care are working," Dr. Mark McClellan, CMS administrator, said at a press briefing. In addition to holding consumer costs steady, CMS officials reported that the national benchmark that determines Medicare's subsidy of drug coverage will decline next year. Competitive bids for the stand-alone drug plans and the Medicare Advantage managed-care prescription drug plans came in with lower-than-expected bids, according to CMS. The open enrollment period for 2007 starts Nov. 15.

Mixed Reviews for Merck

The most recent Vioxx court cases have produced mixed results for the drugmaker Merck & Co., Inc. In August, a Los Angeles jury ruled in the company's favor, finding that the Vioxx (rofecoxib) was not responsible for the heart attack of Stewart Grossberg, who had been taking the drug intermittently. Merck argued successfully that Vioxx was not responsible for Mr. Grossberg's heart attack because he has high cholesterol levels, atherosclerosis, and a family history of cardiac problems. But about two weeks later, a federal jury in New Orleans found Merck liable for $51 million in damages in the 2002 heart attack of Gerald Barnett, a 62-year-old retired special agent with the FBI. The company is exploring grounds for appeal, including insufficient evidence and the application of incorrect legal standards, according to Merck. The company was also dealt another blow in August, when a New Jersey judge decided to set aside a 2005 jury verdict that had been in the Merck's favor. The judge ordered a new trial to take place early next year. The judge cited a December 2005 New England Journal of Medicine editorial expressing concerns about Vioxx-related study data as the basis for throwing out the jury verdict (N. Eng. J. Med. 2005;353:2813-4).

In the Dark on EC

Despite the controversy surrounding the provision of Plan B emergency contraception without a prescription (see story on p. 1), only about one-quarter of Americans in a recent survey said they had heard a lot about the debate. And nearly an equal number said they had heard nothing about the politically charged issue. The survey was commissioned by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. The survey also found that about 48% of those surveyed favored selling emergency contraception without a prescription, whereas about 41% opposed the idea. The national telephone survey was conducted in July among more than 2,000 U.S. adults.

Drug Code Directory Incomplete

The Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Inspector General has found that the Food and Drug Administration's National Drug Code Directory is incomplete and inaccurate, largely as a result of drug companies' failure to submit required data, though the FDA shares some blame. The directory is supposed to be a current compendium of marketed drug products. The FDA relies on internal reports and on submissions from pharmaceutical manufacturers, which must report when a new product is introduced or withdrawn. The OIG report is a snapshot of the directory as of February 2005, when 123,856 products had unique entries. The OIG found that the listing left off just more than 9,000 drug products. For about 16%, the drug maker either had not submitted required forms or the agency had not appropriately processed them. Listings for about 5,100 products had been held up because the companies did not provide needed information. Finally, the OIG found that 34,000 products listed were no longer marketed or their entries contained erroneous information, mostly because drug makers had not told the FDA that the products were discontinued. In a comment, the FDA acknowledged many of the failures, but also said there was a decrease in the percentage of missing products since 1990.

—From staff reports