

IN THE NEWS

News for LTC Professionals
in 100 Words-or-Less

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THEY SAID IT:

"Our overall take on [the incoming Trump administration] is that it's both a regulatory and rate-friendly White House and Congress, and governing administration agencies too. "I don't expect that we'll see anything draconian." Ensign CEO Barry Port

"Although CDC and other federal agencies have programs in place to address both the financial and vaccine hesitancy-related barriers to vaccination in nursing homes, more needs to be done at every level to protect nursing home residents, who constitute one of the population groups at highest risk for severe respiratory disease" from CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*

Census is Good Facilities Will Close

Athena Health Care Systems is looking to close two nursing homes in Bristol.

The healthcare agency filed letters of intent to close Sheriden Woods and Countryside Manor both in Bristol, Connecticut.

Census is not the issue. Sheridan Woods has 146 beds and 136 residents. Countryside Manor has 90 beds and 84 residents.

However, due to a high Medicaid census, Athena said both nursing homes have been operating with losses for many years. They also cite significant physical plant issues at Countryside Manor.

It is not known when the facilities will close.

NBC Connecticut, 11/27/2024

Flip-Flops or Not the Contractors Are Legit

Operator advocates and consultants started fielding calls in summer about CMS site visitors demanding access to facilities without advance notice. Some showed up wearing shorts and flip-flops, and with dirty fingernails, further worrying building managers.

Provider groups said they are continuing efforts to inform members about the legitimacy of the visits, and how they should prepare desk personnel for them.

Site visits have been associated with DME suppliers, home care or hospice providers. It's not clear why SNFs are experiencing the visits and under such odd circumstances.

Regardless, the unannounced site checks are something providers need to be prepared for.

McKnight's, 11/25/2024

A Medicare Minefield Awaits Dr. Oz

Mehmet Oz, President-elect Trump's pick to lead CMS, is about to land in the middle of brewing tensions among Republicans over how the Medicare Advantage program works.

MA plans now enroll more than half of America's seniors, costing the federal government about \$83 billion more annually than the traditional Medicare.

Oz and the Trump administration are decidedly pro-Medicare Advantage and will likely continue to encourage seniors' enrollment in the program. But they may do so in ways that insurance companies don't favor, such as by continuing to scrutinize how plans are paid for enrollees' illnesses.

Axios, 11/27/2024

Dr. Oz Had Holdings In Concerns He Would Regulate

President-elect Donald Trump's choice to run the sprawling government agency that administers Medicare, Medicaid, and the Affordable Care Act marketplace -- former talk show host Mehmet Oz, MD -- recently held broad investments in healthcare, tech, and food companies that would pose significant conflicts of interest.

Oz's holdings include a stake in UnitedHealth Group worth as much as \$600,000, as well as shares of pharmaceutical firms and tech companies with business in the healthcare sector.

Collectively, Oz's investments total tens of millions of dollars, revealed in disclosures filed during his failed 2022 run for a Pennsylvania U.S. Senate seat.

MedPage Today, 11/29/2024

SNFs Testing Wastewater For Infection Control

A new nursing home wastewater partnership is designed to predict and possibly control the spread of COVID-19, influenza, RSV, and other emerging pathogens.

The LeadingAge LTSS Center at the University of Massachusetts Boston is teaming up with water management company Aquora Research and Consulting, Good Samaritan Society and Western Home Services.

A 2021 study proved that wastewater testing in nursing homes, dorms, prisons and other communal living facilities was an effective method for detecting cases up to seven days before an outbreak.

New technology will see if it can accurately detect the presence of certain infectious diseases through wastewater samples.

McKnight's, 11/25/2024

Violated Arb Rule May Face Legal Challenges

A state circuit court has ruled, an Arkansas nursing home cannot enforce an arbitration agreement, leaving the provider open to a possible lawsuit from a resident who alleges medical malpractice and neglect.

The court on Nov. 13 found Hickory Heights Health & Rehab's arbitration agreement to be "illegal in violation of federal regulations and ... against public policy as stated by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services."

Some legal experts said it could mark the beginning of a potentially long road for the nursing home. The case will now proceed to a jury trial rather than arbitration.

Legal Newsline, 11/22/2024

IN THE TRENCHES – COVID-19 & Other Outbreaks in the U.S. and the World

AMERICA: Between November 3 and November 9, the CDC detected "very high" levels of COVID-19 in New Mexico, with "high" levels found in Montana, Wyoming and South Dakota. "Moderate" levels were detected across Idaho, Nebraska, Maine, Nevada, Maryland, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and Missouri. "Low" levels were found in 21 states, and "minimal" levels were detected in 14 states and D.C. (*Newsweek*).

SWITZERLAND: Rates of in-hospital death and ICU admissions were similar among adults hospitalized in Switzerland with healthcare-linked COVID-19 or influenza infections during SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant predominance. Led by researchers from the Infection Control Program and WHO's Collaborating Center at Geneva University Hospitals, the retrospective study involved 2,901 symptomatic COVID-19 patients and 868 flu patients at nine hospitals (*Clinical Infectious Diseases*).

AMERICA: A investigation found that RSV was linked with a heavy burden of intensive care unit (ICU) admissions, hospitalizations and in-hospital deaths in adults in the years before an RSV vaccine was approved for use in the U.S. Data was collected from seven seasons, 2016-2023. The highest burden was in the 2017-2018 season, when there were 8,620 in-hospital deaths (*JAMA Network Open*).

THE WORLD: COVID-19 reshaped mobility patterns worldwide, affecting walking, driving and public transit use. Research, led by an international team analyzed data from 296 cities to understand how urban transportation habits adapted during the pandemic. Lower-density cities saw quicker recoveries in driving and walking, while dense urban areas, reliant on public transit, recovered more slowly. Cities with higher infection rates saw increased driving and walking, while cities with fewer cases turned to public transportation (*The Lancet Public Health*).

CALIFORNIA: Sixty-two more avian flu outbreaks in dairy cattle, all involving California herds have been identified.. The latest detections lift the state's total since the end of August to 398 and the national total to 612. California is the nation's largest dairy producer, and outbreaks in the Central Valley have now affected nearly one-third of the state's estimated 1,300 herds (*USDA*).

THE WORLD: Three more countries have reported cholera outbreaks since its last update in October: Iraq (571 cases 1 death), Lebanon (one case), and South Sudan (49 cases one fatal). So far 33 countries have reported cholera outbreaks this year. Cases in October were 42% lower than the same period in 2023. However, deaths rose 54%, a sign of severe outbreak response settings (*WHO*).

CZECH REPUBLIC: When given early, the antiviral drug *molnupiravir* (Lagevrio) halved the risk of COVID-19 death and reduced all-cause deaths among older adults in in 2022 findings. Masaryk University researchers analyzed data from all 74,541 adults with a diagnosis of COVID-19 in the national registry infection treated with *molnupiravir* from January through December 2022 (*Open Forum Infectious Diseases*).

CANADA: A new study suggests migraine sufferers were at greater risk of developing depression during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 2,181 adults ages 45 to 85 with migraines were surveyed. Among respondents who had no history of depression, the cumulative incidence of depression was higher among those with migraine during the fall of 2020 (14.9%) than the 11.8% of those without migraine (*Journal of Pain Research*).

AMERICA: An analysis of US long-term care (LTC) pharmacy dispensing data shows overall antibiotic prescribing rates in nursing homes fell from 2013 to 2021. Over the study period, the percentage of LTC residents receiving an antibiotic decreased from 51% to 44%, total use rates in antibiotic courses/1,000 resident-days fell by 8%, and total use rates in antibiotic DOT/1,000 resident days fell by 8% (*Antimicrobial Stewardship & Healthcare Epidemiology*).

AMERICA: By November 9, 34.7% of adults reported having received a flu vaccine dose, and 17.9% had received an updated COVID-19 vaccine for the 2024-25 respiratory virus season. A total of 39.7% of adults aged 75 years and older and 31.6% of those aged 60 to 74 at high risk for severe RSV had ever received an RSV vaccine (*Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*).

THE WORLD: An online survey of physicians in the United States, France, and Germany reveals that they consider pertussis (whooping cough) vaccines less important than those against COVID-19, influenza, and pneumococcal disease, although they recognize that adults with weakened immune systems and chronic respiratory illnesses are at elevated risk (*CIDRAP*).

SAN FRANCISCO: The spread of H5N1 avian flu — which has killed millions of chickens, has prompted some to wonder whether eating turkey is safe or advisable. The short answer is yes. Food safety regulators and infectious disease experts say despite avian flu having infected many turkey flocks since the virus began circulating in the U.S. in 2022, consuming cooked turkey should be safe (*San Francisco Chronicle*).

AMERICA: Public health experts are sounding the alarm about low vaccination rates against the coronavirus, flu and RSV. With traveling and get-togethers on the horizon many people are heading into Christmas unprotected against these respiratory illnesses, which typically peak from December to February. As of this month, about 37% of adults 18 and older had received a seasonal flu shot, while 19% had received updated coronavirus vaccines and 40% of adults 75 and older — the group at greatest risk — got an RSV vaccine (*Washington Post*).

COVID-19, 11/29/2024

World Total Cases
776,841,264

World Total Deaths
7,075,468

U.S. Total Deaths
1,207,479

World Health Organization

Even in SNFs Very Few Adults Getting Vaxed

In a CDC evaluation of vaccinations in nursing homes, as November 10, 29.7% of nursing home residents had received an updated COVID-19 vaccine dose.

Coverage ranged from 19.8% in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas to 38.6% in Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming.

Of those living at nursing homes who reported vaccinations against flu (59.4%) and RSV (51.8%), 58.4% had received a flu vaccine dose, and 17.9% were vaccinated against RSV.

Flu vaccines ranged from 50.9% in Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington state to 64.1% in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report

Trump Picks Bhattacharya To Head Up N.I.H

President-elect Donald J. Trump has selected Dr. Jay Bhattacharya to be the director of the National Institutes of Health.

Bhattacharya is a Stanford physician and economist whose authorship of an anti-lockdown treatise during the coronavirus pandemic made him a central figure in a bitter public health debate.

Bhattacharya is one of three lead authors of the Great Barrington Declaration, a manifesto issued in 2020 that contended that the virus should be allowed to spread among young healthy people who were "at minimal risk of death" so they would develop natural immunity, while prevention efforts were targeted sick or older people.

New York Times, 11/26/2024

Bhattacharya Is Long-Time Critic of Fauci

Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, President-elect Donald Trump's pick to lead the National Institutes of Health, remains a vocal critic of Dr. Anthony Fauci and his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bhattacharya has accused Fauci and other leaders of suppressing scientific research and debate during the pandemic.

"The rot, having accumulated over decades, was plain for all to see," he wrote in an opinion piece published on UnHerd, a British news and opinion site, earlier in November.

Newsweek, 11/27/2024

Tennessee May be Down, But It's Far from Out

Tennessee this year landed 47th (four from the bottom) in a state-by-state ranking of senior care staffing levels. But rather than tuck its tail, the Volunteer State is being proactive.

For example, Ensign Group has added nine facilities as part of a \$500 million Care Trust deal in which the REIT picked up 30 Tennessee facilities.

Tennessee is a target for LTC for several reasons – favorable reimbursement, positive political climate and an education program aimed at growing the LTC workforce.

The state also has 1.6 million people over 60 now, but that's projected to grow 60% by 2030.

McKnight's, 11/26/2024

Cutting Antihypertensives Didn't Up Hospitalizations

A new study found no link between de-prescribing antihypertensive medications and a higher risk of hospitalization for stroke and myocardial infarction in long-term care residents living in Veterans Affairs facilities.

The rate of myocardial infarction and stroke for residents who were part of a trial group that underwent a 30% reduction in antihypertensive drugs was similar to those who were not de-prescribed – 11.2% compared to 8.8%.

The trial targeted LTC residents, 65+ who had been living in a Veterans community longer than 90 days.

McKnight's, 11/26/2024

ONE COLUMN Another Indication Vaccination Provides Protection

In a Swiss study, a higher percentage of patients were admitted to an intermediate care unit for COVID-19 (2.9%) than for flu (1.4%), and a greater proportion of flu patients had complications than those with COVID-19 (35.3% vs 29.3%).

While there was no difference in risk of death by vaccination status (at least one dose vs none), hospital stays were a median of 2 days longer (16 vs 14 days) among unvaccinated COVID-19 patients (16 vs 14 days) and flu patients (16 vs 11). Likewise, COVID-19 patients who had received the last of at least 3 doses within the past year had shorter hospital stays than those who were unvaccinated or had received a vaccine dose more than a year before.

The impact of cumulative vaccine- and infection-derived immune responses likely explains the reduction in hazard for in-hospital mortality for COVID-19 as compared to influenza.

"While the relative hazard may be comparable, it is important to recognize that the absolute number of patients with healthcare-associated COVID-19 (Omicron) was three-fold higher than the number of patients with healthcare-associated influenza," the researchers wrote. "COVID-19 therefore still represents a substantially larger clinical burden for hospitals than influenza in Switzerland."

The finding of shorter hospital stays among the vaccinated confirm vaccines' protective effects.

"The impact of cumulative vaccine- and infection-derived immune responses likely explains the reduction in hazard for in-hospital mortality for COVID-19 as compared to influenza, as well as changes in the inherent virulence of pre-Omicron versus Omicron SARS-CoV-2 variants," the authors wrote. "Although we also cannot exclude that changes in the virulence of influenza strains and pre-existing immunity may also contribute to our observations."

CIDRAP, 11/18/2024

Larger Nursing Home Chains Linked to Lower Staffing

A new study that examined more than 9,000 US nursing homes across 610 chains found that larger chains had more prevalent staffing challenges, including staff instability and fewer hours of direct care provided to patients.

The report by the Department of Population Health Sciences segmented nursing home chains into five quintiles.

Only chains in quintile one (comprising the smallest chains) were shown to meet the minimum requirement for RNs, at 0.72 hours. RNs working at nursing homes in quintile five chains, on the other hand, averaged only 0.41 hours.

McKnight's, 11/26/2024

In Case You're Wondering

The above study also showed there to be a higher number of patients with more complex needs such as Alzheimer's and dementia-related diseases in smaller chains — 12.6% in quintile one compared to 6.3% in quintile five.

The states with the highest percentage of nursing home chains, the research showed, were Indiana, with 85% of all nursing homes being owned by chains, followed by Oregon (77%) and Idaho (77%).

Vermont (38%), Wyoming (42%) and North Dakota (42%) had the lowest percentage of nursing home chain ownership.

McKnight's, 11/26/2024

Surprise! Surprise! Surprise! Weldon Not on Anyone's List

Dr. Dave Weldon, a former Republican Congressman and President-elect Trump's pick for CDC boss, has been off the political stage for more than 15 years.

Now running a private medical practice in Malabar, Florida, Weldon was hardly regarded as a leading candidate to run the federal agency, a \$9 billion behemoth with a staff of more than 13,000 that has become a target of conservative rage.

Yet over the years, his views have aligned in many ways with those of Robert F.

Kennedy Jr., Trump's choice for HHS secretary — and Weldon's potential boss. The two have maintained a 25-year relationship.

The Seattle Times, 11/29/2024

Telehealth Prescribing Extended for Another Year

The one-year extension comes a month before the rule was set to expire and a month after a DEA proposal threatened to leave providers with tightened stipulations around how they could treat patients.

Some noted the ruling is a temporary, yet necessary solution to what would have left a large number of residents without their required care.

In the current rule "the prescription is issued for a legitimate medical purpose by a practitioner acting in the usual course of professional practice." [It]should also be issued "pursuant to a communication between a practitioner and a patient using an interactive telecommunications system."

McKnight's, 11/19/2024

Nursing Homes Can Be Bridge to Opioid Recovery

A Brown University school of Public Health study has found that nursing homes could offer a crucial bridge to recovery for patients with opioid use disorder (OUD), but stigma, regulatory hurdles and funding challenges limit their potential.

Better financial support for nursing homes, stronger relationships between nursing homes and hospitals would help, along with policy changes that address stigma against people with OUD.

The U.S has an ageing population with OUD. Study leader Patience Moyo Dow said, "Data suggests that the prevalence of OUD among older adults is increasing, and this group is also experiencing higher rates of overdose fatalities."

Skilled Nursing News, 11/27/2024

FREE COVID TEST KITS
covidtests.gov

Briefly in the News

Nearly a year after the Biden administration gave Florida the green light to become the first state to import lower-cost prescription drugs from Canada — a longtime goal of politicians across the political spectrum, including President-elect Donald Trump — the program has yet to begin. And a Florida health official said there is no planned date yet for the state to begin importing drugs (**KFF Health News**).

Genetic risk for Alzheimer's disease and dementia appeared to be partly offset by high levels of cardiorespiratory fitness. Across all age groups between 39 and 70, higher fitness was tied to better cognitive function. The incidence rate ratio (IRR) of all-cause dementia was 0.60 for high versus low cardiorespiratory fitness. Dementia onset was delayed by 1.48 years in the high fitness group (**British Journal of Sports Medicine**).

After a certain threshold, cumulative opioid use was associated with higher dementia risk. In a nested case-control study by researchers at Copenhagen University Hospital Rigshospitalet in Denmark opioid use above 90 total standardized doses (TSDs) was associated with increased all-cause dementia risk. Cumulative opioid exposure of 91 to 200 TSDs yielded an increased dementia incidence rate ratio of 1.29. Exposure greater than 500 TSDs had an IRR of 1.59 (**JAMA Network Open**).

In 2017 Philadelphia levied a tax on sugary drinks hoping to combat kids' obesity. Didn't work. Comparing 2-to-18 year olds in Philly with same-aged kids in surrounding counties, the BMI in Philadelphia dropped by only an insignificant 0.004 (**MedPage Today**).

Muhammad Zafar, 53, has been sentenced to 3 years 5 months in federal prison. He operated a home health care business in Michigan which offered kickbacks and bribes to beneficiary recruiters in exchange for Medicare beneficiary information. In 2015 after his initial court appearance Zafar fled to Canada and then to Pakistan where he remained a fugitive for 7 ½ years before returning to the United States to face the charges against him (**DOJ news release**).