Top news stories from AMA Morning Rounds®: Week of March 8, 2021

Read AMA Morning Rounds®’ most popular stories in medicine and public health from the week of March 8, 2021–March 12, 2021.

CDC researchers say mask mandates, dining restrictions tied to decreases in COVID-19 infections, deaths

The New York Times (3/5, Rabin) reported CDC researchers found that in counties across the U.S., wearing masks “was linked to fewer infections with” SARS-CoV-2 and fewer deaths from COVID-19. In the same study, “researchers also found that counties opening restaurants for on-premises dining—indoors or outdoors—saw a rise in daily infections about six weeks later, and an increase in [COVID-19] death rates about two months later.” While “the study does not prove cause and effect,” these “findings square with other research showing that masks prevent infection and that indoor spaces foster the spread of the virus through aerosols.”

The AP (3/5, Stobbe) reported CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said, “All of this is very consistent. You have decreases in cases and deaths when you wear masks, and you have increases in cases and deaths when you have in-person restaurant dining.”

CDC issues new guidance saying people who have been fully vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2 can gather in small groups without masks

The New York Times (3/8, Rabin) reports the CDC “issued long-awaited advice to Americans fully vaccinated against [COVID-19], freeing them to take some liberties that the unvaccinated should not, including gathering indoors in small groups without precautions while still adhering to masking and distancing in public spaces.” The agency’s new guidelines also recommend “that vaccinated people may visit indoors with unvaccinated people from a single household so long as no one among the unvaccinated is at risk for severe disease if infected with the coronavirus.”
The Washington Post (3/8, A1, Sun, Bernstein) reports the CDC “said people who are two weeks past their final shot face little risk if they visit indoors with unvaccinated members of a single household at low risk of severe disease, without wearing masks or distancing.” The new guidelines “would free many vaccinated grandparents who live near their unvaccinated children and grandchildren to gather for the first time in a year.” However, the new guidelines still “discourage visits involving long-distance travel.”

USPSTF recommends large increase in Americans eligible for free annual lung cancer screening

The Washington Post (3/9, McGinley) reports the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) has “recommended a major increase in the number of Americans eligible for free screening for lung cancer, saying expanded testing will save lives and especially benefit Black people and women.” The expert panel “said people with a long history of smoking should begin receiving annual low-dose CT scans at age 50, five years earlier than the group recommended in 2013.” USPSTF “also broadened the definition of people it considers at high risk for the disease.” The updated recommendations were published in JAMA.

The New York Times (3/9, Grady) reports the USPSTF’s new recommendations “will nearly double the number of people in the United States who are advised to have yearly CT scans to screen for lung cancer, and will include many more African-Americans and women than in the past.” Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths in the U.S., “and the goal of the expanded screening is to find it early enough to cure it in more people at high risk because of smoking.” Large studies have concluded that among people at risk, “annual CT scans can reduce the risk of death from the cancer by 20 to 25%.”

Congress approves sweeping $1.9T coronavirus relief package

The Washington Post (3/10, Romm) reports that Congress “approved a sweeping $1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package on Wednesday, authorizing a flurry of new federal spending and a temporary yet dramatic increase in anti-poverty programs to help millions of families still struggling amid the pandemic.” The bill, “dubbed the American Rescue Plan, authorizes another round of stimulus payments up to $1,400 for most Americans; extends additional, enhanced unemployment aid to millions still out of work; and makes major changes to the tax code to benefit families with children.”

The AP (3/10, Fram) reports, “Besides the direct payments and jobless-benefit extension, the measure has hundreds of billions for COVID-19 vaccines and treatments, schools, state and local
governments and ailing industries from airlines to concert halls. There is aid for farmers of color, pension systems and student borrowers, and subsidies for consumers buying health insurance and states expanding Medicaid coverage for lower earners.”

**Stimulus package will leave providers facing significant Medicare spending cuts**

RevCycle Intelligence (3/11, LaPointe) reports, “The latest $1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package includes several provisions advantageous to [health care] providers but will leave them to face significant Medicare spending cuts in the future.” The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 “will funnel $8.5 billion to reimburse rural [health care] providers for expenses and lost revenues attributable to COVID-19.” The package “will also allocate over $100 billion to support COVID-19 [vaccinations] and testing, including $10 billion for bolstering supplies through the Defense Production Act and over $15 billion for expanding vaccine distribution and administration, and $47.8 billion to continue implementation of an evidence-based testing strategy.” The American Medical Association (AMA) “has...already asked Congress to prevent the triggering of Medicare spending cuts as part of implementation of the COVID-19 relief package.”

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