

Top news stories from AMA Morning Rounds®: Week of June 28, 2021

Read *AMA Morning Rounds*®' most popular stories in medicine and public health from the week of June 28, 2021–July 2, 2021.

COVID-19 vaccines may not end concerns for some Americans with compromised immune systems

USA Today (6/27, Weintraub) reports, “Although COVID-19 vaccines work incredibly well for the vast majority of people, roughly 10 million Americans whose immune systems are compromised because of medication or disease may not be well protected.” Researchers remain unsure “exactly what an adequate immune response looks like—or what level of protection is enough. And once they figure out who is protected, they need to figure out what to do for people” such as patients with cancer or transplant recipients.

Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna COVID-19 vaccines likely provide “vast majority” of recipients with long-term immunity, researchers say

The New York Times (6/28, Mandavilli) reports a new study published in *Nature* has found the COVID-19 vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna “set off a persistent immune reaction in the body that may protect against the coronavirus for years, scientists reported on Monday.” Researchers gathered samples from the lymph nodes of 14 recruits at five different points following the first dose, finding “the number of memory cells that recognized the coronavirus had not declined” 15 weeks later. The Times adds, “The results suggest that a vast majority of vaccinated people will be protected over the long term.”

In a separate article, the New York Times (6/28, Mandavilli, Zimmer, Robbins) says the study adds to other research suggesting that “widely used vaccines will continue to protect people against the coronavirus for long periods, possibly for years, and can be adapted to fortify the immune system still further if needed.”

Hospitals, corporations now own nearly half of U.S. physician practices, analysis finds

RevCycle Intelligence (6/29, LaPointe) reports, “Hospitals and corporations now own nearly half of physician practices in the U.S., underscoring a long-standing trend of physician practice acquisitions by hospitals and other corporate entities,” according to a Physicians Advocacy Institute analysis (PDF) of “physician practice acquisitions between January 1, 2019, and January 1, 2021.” Findings showed “that hospitals and other corporate entities acquired 20,900 physician practices over the two-year period, representing a 25% increase in corporate-owned practices overall.”

According to Modern Healthcare (6/29, Bannow, Subscription Publication), “Hospitals scooped up 18,600 more physicians during the study period, leading to a 5% increase in the share of doctors employed by hospitals. Hospitals also acquired 3,200 more physician practices during that time, an 8% increase.” The article adds that the American Medical Association “highlighted growing physician employment at hospitals and other companies when it declared that, for the first time, the majority of doctors worked outside of physician-owned practices as of last year.”

Breast, cervical cancer screenings declined sharply during early part of pandemic, CDC data show

Healio (6/30, Byrne) reports, “Breast cancer and cervical cancer screenings declined sharply during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to CDC data released” on Wednesday. The analysis of data from the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program “showed an 87% decline in breast cancer screening and an 84% decline in cervical cancer screening in April 2020 compared with the previous 5-year averages for that month.”

HealthDay (6/30, Preidt) reports that this “could lead to delayed cancer diagnoses, health consequences and an increase in existing disparities, the agency warned.” Furthermore, “the new findings ‘reinforce the need to safely maintain routine health care services during the pandemic, especially when the health care environment meets COVID-19 safety guidelines,’ said lead study author Amy DeGross, a CDC health scientist.” The study was published online in the journal

Preventive Medicine.

Administration unveils first set of rules banning surprise medical billing

The New York Times (7/1, Kliff, Sanger-Katz) reports, “The Biden administration took its first steps Thursday toward finalizing the details of a ban on surprise medical bills that Congress passed and President Trump signed into law last winter.”

The AP (7/1, Alonso-Zaldivar) reports, “Regulations jointly issued by four federal agencies spell out protections for insured patients against surprise billing in medical emergencies, and unexpected charges from out-of-network doctors at an in-network facility.” Additionally, “out-of-network clinicians and service providers would...be barred from billing patients for the difference between their charges and what insurance paid.”

Modern Healthcare (7/1, Brady, Subscription Publication) reports, “While public health insurance programs like Medicare and Medicaid already prohibit balance billing, people with job-based coverage or individual health plans frequently and unknowingly accept care from an out-of-network provider before they are slapped with a surprise medical bill. The new rule aims to put a stop to that.” And “according to CMS, two-thirds of all bankruptcies in the U.S. are tied to medical expenses, and researchers estimate that 1 in 6 emergency department visits result in an unexpected bill.”

Editor’s note: Learn more on how the AMA has fought for surprise billing reform.

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