Top news stories from AMA Morning Rounds®: Week of Sept. 20, 2021

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FDA panel votes to recommend coronavirus boosters for older adults and individuals at risk of serious illness

The Washington Post (9/17, Johnson, McGinley, Achenbach) reported, “Expert advisers to the Food and Drug Administration voted unanimously Friday to recommend that the agency authorize a booster shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine six months after vaccination for people 65 years and older and for anyone at risk for severe illness.”

Reuters (9/17, Maddipatla, Erman) reported, “The panel also recommended that the FDA include health care workers and others at high risk of occupational exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19, such as teachers.” Reuters added that “despite the narrowed scope of the proposed authorization, the panel’s recommendation would cover most Americans who got their shots in the earliest stages of the U.S. vaccination campaign.”

Administration launches strategy to address public health risks linked to extreme heat

The Washington Post (9/20, Joselow) reports, “President Biden launched a government-wide strategy Monday to combat extreme heat, including the development of new federal labor standards aimed at protecting workers from the impact of rising temperatures linked to climate change.” In a statement, the president “said six federal agencies would coordinate to protect vulnerable populations—including outdoor workers, children and the elderly—from heat-related illnesses and other public health risks linked to rising global temperatures.”

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Physicians have prescribed 44% fewer opioids over past decade, but overdoses have continued to climb, report finds

The Hill (9/21, Coleman) reports, “Physicians have prescribed 44% fewer opioids over the past decade, yet fatal and non-fatal drug overdoses have continued to climb, according to a new report (PDF) from the American Medical Association (AMA)” that “documented a 44.4% decrease in opioid prescriptions between 2011 and 2020, with a 6.9% reduction between 2019 and last year, with more physicians using prescription drug monitoring programs.” Nevertheless, CDC data revealed that “more than 93,000 people died of drug overdoses in 2020, including about 69,000 from opioid overdoses,” representing “a record high and an almost 30% increase in overall fatal overdoses from the prior year.”

In a statement, AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, M.D., said, “Patients need policymakers, health insurance plans, national pharmacy chains and other stakeholders to change their focus and help us remove barriers to evidence-based care.”

FDA authorizes Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus booster shot for people 65 and older and adults at risk of severe illness

USA Today (9/22, Weise, Weintraub) reports, “The Food and Drug Administration on Wednesday authorized booster doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for people 65 and older and those whose jobs put them at high risk for exposure to COVID-19.” Additionally, “individuals 18 and up who are at high risk for severe COVID-19 were...included in the authorization.”

The Hill (9/22, Weixel) reports, “The FDA said booster doses are to be administered at least six months after completion of the second shot.”

CDC Director overrules advisory panel to broaden recommended use of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine booster shots for frontline workers

The New York Times (9/23, Mandavilli, Mueller) reports that on Friday, CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky “overruled a recommendation by an agency advisory panel that had refused to endorse booster shots of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID vaccine for frontline workers.” The CDC’s Advisory
Committee on Immunization Practices had “recommended the boosters for a wide range of Americans, including tens of millions of older adults and younger people at high risk for the disease. But they excluded health care workers, teachers and others whose jobs put them at risk.”

The Washington Post (9/23, A1, Sun, McGinley) reports, “While Walensky agreed with most of what the advisers recommended, she added a recommendation that hewed closely to the FDA language. Individuals ages 18 to 64 at risk of exposure and transmission because of occupational or institutional setting may receive a booster shot, she said in a statement, released just before midnight.” In the statement, Walensky said it was her job “to recognize where our actions can have the greatest impact.” AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, M.D., “praised the CDC panel for its ‘thoughtful deliberations and recommendations.’ With hospitalization rates 10 to 22 times as high among the unvaccinated as among the vaccinated, he said in a statement, ‘our top priority should remain reaching those individuals who remain unvaccinated against COVID-19.’”

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