

Top news stories from AMA Morning Rounds®: Week of Sept. 27, 2021

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States begin complicated COVID-19 booster shot rollout even as millions remain unvaccinated

The New York Times (9/24, A1, Weiland, Abelson, Hoffman) reported, “State health officials rushed on Friday to roll out campaigns to provide coronavirus booster shots for millions of vulnerable people who got the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and to help a confused public understand who qualifies for the extra shots.” Some of their challenges include “making sure that recipients of the Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines know that they are not yet eligible for boosters, reaching isolated elderly people and informing younger adults with medical conditions or jobs that place them at higher risk that they might be eligible under the broad federal rules.”

The AP (9/24, Neergaard, Stobbe) reported the U.S. began “a campaign to offer boosters of Pfizer’s COVID-19 vaccine to millions of Americans on Friday even as federal health officials stressed the real problem remains getting first shots to the unvaccinated.” CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said, “We will not boost our way out of this pandemic.” Most “COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are among the unvaccinated, Walensky noted.” Those “anxious for another Pfizer dose lost no time rolling up their sleeves after Walensky ruled late Thursday on who’s eligible: Americans 65 and older and others vulnerable because of underlying health problems or where they work and live—once they’re six months past their last dose.”

Study finds more than half of American children have detectable levels of lead in blood

MedPage Today (9/27, Wu) reports, “The majority of children in the U.S. still had lead in their blood in the last few years despite decades of policies controlling lead in the environment, and certain groups may be particularly vulnerable.” Data published in *JAMA Pediatrics* “revealed that 50.5% of more than

1 million young children tested nationwide had detectable blood lead levels” and “in four states—Nebraska, Missouri, Michigan, and Iowa—over 75% of children had detectable BLLs.” Study authors “reported that higher BLLs were correlated with poverty, race, and housing, in line with findings from past studies.”

HealthDay (9/27, Reinberg) reports, “Any detectable lead level is abnormal and potentially harmful, particularly in young children, the researchers pointed out.” As “a neurotoxin, lead has been associated with brain and nervous system damage, as well as learning, behavior, speech and hearing problems.”

Nearly three-fourths of U.S. lacked competitive health insurance market in 2020, AMA study finds

Modern Healthcare (9/28, Subscription Publication) reports that “almost three-fourths of U.S. metropolitan areas lacked a competitive health insurance market in 2020, with shrinking options among payers harming patients and providers,” according to a study by the American Medical Association. Modern Healthcare adds that 73% “of 384 metropolitan statistical markets were highly concentrated in 2020, up from 71% in 2014, the physicians’ society reported in its 20th annual study of health insurance markets.” In a statement, AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, M.D., said, “As merger rumors involving health insurers swirl, the prospect of future consolidation in the health insurance industry should be more closely scrutinized given the low levels of competition in most health insurance markets.”

CDC calls for more COVID-19 vaccinations among pregnant people

The New York Times (9/29, Rabin) reports, “In an urgent plea on Wednesday, federal health officials asked that any American who is pregnant, planning to become pregnant or currently breastfeeding get vaccinated against the coronavirus as soon as possible.” COVID-19 “poses a severe risk during pregnancy, when an individual’s immune system is tamped down, and raises the risk of stillbirth or another poor outcome, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.”

Reuters (9/29, Mishra) reports, “The CDC said its data showed only 31% of pregnant people have been vaccinated against COVID-19,” and “although more pregnant women are now vaccinated, the CDC said uptake of vaccines for pregnant women has been lower compared to the general population.”

CNN (9/29, Fox) reports that in a health alert, the CDC said, “As of September 27, 2021, more than 125,000 laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases have been reported in pregnant people, including more than 22,000 hospitalized cases and 161 deaths.”

Administration releases rule for how health care providers, insurers should implement legislation prohibiting surprise medical bills

The Hill (9/30, Vakil) reports, “The Biden administration on Thursday released a rule for how health care providers and insurers should implement legislation prohibiting what are known as surprise medical bills.” This “rule applies to the bipartisan legislation passed last December, known as the No Surprise Act,” that “is intended to prevent surprise medical bills and is slated to go into effect Jan. 1.”

The AP (9/30, Alonso-Zaldivar) reports that under the rule, patients need no longer “worry about getting a huge bill following a medical crisis if the closest hospital emergency room happened to have been outside their insurance plan’s provider network.” Additionally, “they’ll...be protected from unexpected charges if an out-of-network clinician takes part in a surgery or procedure conducted at an in-network hospital.”

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