Top news stories from AMA Morning Rounds®: Week Dec. 5, 2022

Read AMA Morning Rounds®’ most popular stories in medicine and public health from the week of Dec. 5, 2022–Dec. 9, 2022.

Postmortem study ties vitamin D in brain tissue to better cognitive performance in older adults

HealthDay (12/8, Norton) reports research indicates that “when older adults had higher levels of vitamin D in their brain tissue, they tended to perform better on standard tests of memory and thinking.” Additionally, they were “less likely to have dementia or milder cognitive impairments.” The study team arrived at this conclusion after examining “autopsied brain tissue” from 290 participants who had undergone cognitive testing while still alive. The findings were published online in the journal Alzheimer’s & Dementia.

CMS releases proposed rule to speed up prior authorization, implement electronic process

Healthcare Finance News (12/7, Morse) reports in the new Advancing Interoperability and Improving Prior Authorization Proposed Rule, CMS “is changing prior authorization standards to speed up the time it takes for payers to approve the requests and is implementing HL7 FHIR standards to support an electronic process.” The agency “is proposing to require certain payers, including Medicare Advantage organizations, to implement electronic prior authorization and to send decisions within 72 hours for expedited requests and seven days for non-urgent requests.” The rule “would require implementation of a Health Level 7 (HL7) FHIR standard API to support electronic prior authorization.”

MedPage Today (12/7, Firth) reports, “Tuesday’s proposed rule also ‘formally withdraws’ the previous CMS Interoperability and Prior Authorization proposed rule (85 FR 82586).”
Editor's note: Overused prior authorization processes cause care delays, patient harm and practice hassles. Learn how the AMA is leading the charge to fix prior authorization.

Drug overdose deaths among pregnant, postpartum people reached record high in 2020

NBC News (12/6, Edwards) reports, “The number of pregnant women and new mothers dying from drug overdoses grew dramatically as the pandemic took hold, reaching a record high in 2020,” according to a study. Investigators “looked at the death certificates of 7,642 people who died while pregnant or had just given birth from 2017 through 2020.” And “of those, 1,249 died of a drug overdose—usually from methamphetamine, cocaine or the synthetic opioid fentanyl,” according to the findings published in a research letter in JAMA.

MedPage Today (12/6, DePeau-Wilson) reports according to investigators, “from 2017 to 2020, overdose deaths in this population rose from 6.56 to 11.85 per 100,000 individuals, representing an 81% increase.” In “comparison, overdose deaths among non-pregnant females of reproductive age increased from 14.37 to 19.76 per 100,000, a relative increase of 38%.”

U.S. experiencing highest levels of hospitalizations from influenza in a decade, CDC says

The Washington Post (12/5, Nirappil) reports, “Nearly every U.S. state is battling high levels of flu-like illness, public health authorities warned Monday as multiple respiratory viruses threaten to overwhelm the health care system while people travel for the holidays and gather indoors with friends and family.” CDC officials “say they’re seeing signs of an early and severe flu season that turned significantly worse during Thanksgiving week.” American Medical Association Board of Trustees Chair Sandra Fryhofer, M.D., said, “It’s a perfect storm for a terrible holiday season.”

Reuters (12/5, Heavey, Humer) reports the U.S. “is experiencing the highest levels of hospitalizations from influenza that it has seen in a decade for this time of year...said" CDC Director Rochelle Walensky, M.D., M.P.H., “adding that 14 children have died so far this flu season.” According to agency estimates, “there have been at least 8.7 million illnesses, 78,000 hospitalizations, and 4,500 deaths from flu so far this season.” Walensky, joined by Fryhofer, “urged people to get flu shots now—despite possibly being wary or tired of vaccinations—saying it was not too late.”
CNN (12/5, Goodman) reports, “This year’s flu shot appears to be ‘a very good match’ to the circulating strains...said” Walensky, but “she noted that flu vaccinations are lagging behind the pace of previous years.”

U.S. health officials warn of worsening flu season

The AP (12/2, Stobbe) reported U.S. “health officials said Friday that 7.5% of outpatient medical visits last week were due to flu-like illnesses,” which is “as high as the peak of the 2017-18 flu season and higher than any season since.” The article added, “The annual winter flu season usually doesn’t get going until December or January, but this one began early and has been complicated by the simultaneous spread of other viruses.” Furthermore, “44 states reported high or very high flu activity last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Friday.”

The Hill (12/3, Gans) said the CDC “reported that 31 U.S. jurisdictions, which include territories and Washington, D.C., had ‘very high’ levels of respiratory illness and 16 jurisdictions had ‘high’ levels last week.”