Growth of Home Care Coverage Outpaced Number of Workers

Although Medicaid’s coverage for home- and community-based services has expanded over the last 2 decades, the growth of the workforce has not kept pace, according to an analysis published in Health Affairs.

Between 1999 and 2020, the number of US residents using home- and community-based services covered through Medicaid, which pays for the majority of long-term services and supports in the US, grew from 1.1 million to about 3.4 million. The fastest rate of increase occurred between 2013 and 2020.

The home care labor force also increased over time, from about 840 000 workers in 2008 to 1.2 million in 2013 and to 1.4 million by 2019. Despite those increases, the number of workers per 100 participants decreased by 11.6% between 2013 and 2019.

“[E]xpanded coverage alone is not sufficient to improve access,” the researchers wrote. “[I]t should be coupled with investment in the workforce to meet rising demand.”

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Updated Meta-analysis: Cranberry Products Reduced UTI Risk

Cranberry products—including juice or capsules—reduced the risk of symptomatic, confirmed urinary tract infections (UTIs) in several groups, according to results published in the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews.

The results suggested that consuming cranberry products reduced UTI risk in children by 54%, in people susceptible to UTIs after a medical intervention such as radiation treatment for bladder or prostate cancer by 53%, and in women with a history of recurrent UTIs by 26%. However, older people living in nursing or care homes, pregnant women, and adults who have problems emptying their bladder might not benefit from the products.

Most of the studies—45 of the 50—compared participants treated with cranberry products with those who received a placebo or no specific treatment. About half of the studies included in the current analysis were added after the review’s last update in 2012 found that cranberry products didn’t help prevent UTIs. In addition, although 23 studies involved a for-profit organization, the researchers found no difference in UTI risk when commercial involvement was taken into account.

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Ownership Data Now Available for Hospice and Home Health Agencies

The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recently released ownership information about more than 6000 Medicare-certified hospices and 11 000 home health agencies. The publicly available data include information about mergers, acquisitions, consolidations, and changes in ownership, as well as whether a given agency’s owners are direct or indirect and whether they are an individual or organization.

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BCG Vaccine Not Effective Against COVID-19

Although the bacille Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccine is used primarily to protect against tuberculosis, previous research has suggested it might also guard against other infections. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers hypothesized that vaccination with BCG, which seems to cause epigenetic changes in immune cells that promote a stronger immune response against pathogens, might be effective against COVID-19.

However, the BCG-Denmark vaccine does not result in a lower risk of symptomatic or severe COVID-19 within 6 months of administration, according to a randomized clinical trial that included 3988 health care workers. There was no evidence of vaccine-related adverse effects, the researchers reported in the New England Journal of Medicine.

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ACAs Had “Minimal” Effect on Health Insurance Stability

Although the Affordable Care Act (ACA) reduced the proportion of uninsured US residents from 20% to 12.5% in any given month, the legislation had little effect on their ability to maintain health coverage, according to a recent study.

The researchers analyzed coverage data in 2-year increments between 2007 and 2013 (the pre-ACA period) as well as between 2014 (the post-ACA period) and 2019 (the pre–COVID-19 period). Their findings showed that the proportion of people who lost their insurance during a 2-year period was similar: 14% pre-ACA and 12% afterward. The researchers noted that much of the ACA’s increased coverage came from Medicaid expansions and the creation of private health insurance exchanges—2 sources that can be quite unstable. In fact, they reported that in 2-year period compared with 8.5% of those with employer-based insurance.

“Perversely, we find that US health insurance coverage—which very purpose is to provide a measure of certainty in an uncertain world—is itself highly uncertain,” the researchers wrote in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

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“[F]amilies deserve transparency when making decisions about hospice and home health care for their loved ones,” HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra, JD, said in a statement. “Shining a light on ownership data is good for families, good for researchers, and good for enforcement agencies.”

Access to ownership information will enable patients and their families to make better-informed decisions about their care, according to the HHS. In addition, it will allow researchers and oversight agencies to recognize owners with subpar performance patterns and determine how market consolidation affects patients’ outcomes and costs.

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RSV Infection During Infancy Tied to Asthma Later
Healthy children who were not infected with respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) during their first year of life were 26% less likely to have asthma by age 5 years than those who had been infected, according to results from an observational study that included 1946 participants. The researchers calculated that preventing RSV infections during infancy could avoid 15% of asthma cases in 5-year-olds.

Moreover, a child’s risk of developing asthma was linked to the severity of their RSV infection. Children with milder RSV infections had a lower risk of asthma at age 5 years than did those who had more severe RSV infections.

“These results support assessment of interventions that prevent, delay, or decrease the severity of the initial RSV infection to reduce the prevalence of childhood asthma at the population level,” the researchers wrote in The Lancet, citing new RSV antibodies as an example of those interventions.

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Swapping Out Sugary Drinks Associated With Lower Mortality
For adults with type 2 diabetes, consuming more than 1 serving of a sugar-sweetened drink per day was linked to a 20% increase in all-cause mortality as well as an increase in cardiovascular disease events and death compared with drinking less than 1 serving per month, according to data from 15 486 participants who were followed up for almost 19 years. Increased consumption of beverages including tea, coffee, plain water, and low-fat milk were associated with lower mortality.

In addition, replacing sugar- or artificially sweetened beverages, fruit juice, or full-fat milk with coffee, tea, or plain water was tied to lower all-cause mortality in participants.

The study’s takeaway is that “[c]hoice of beverage clearly matters,” the authors of a linked editorial wrote in The BMJ, noting that more than 45 countries have implemented taxes on sugar-sweetened drinks to dissuade consumers.

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HIV Status Not Linked to Treatment Outcomes for People With Mpox
Although a disproportionate number of mpox cases—between 35% and 47%, according to some studies—occur in people who also have HIV infection, research comparing the safety and outcomes of mpox treatments in patients with and without HIV is lacking.

Based on recent results from 154 participants with confirmed cases of mpox who received tecovirimat, an antiviral originally developed for smallpox, HIV status did not affect patients’ clinical presentations or treatment outcomes, researchers reported in Annals of Internal Medicine.

The presence and location of lesions were similar between people with and without HIV. In addition, there was no difference in hospitalizations, co-occurring infections, number of days to improvement, or in the rates of persistent symptoms between the groups.

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XBB.1.16 Deemed COVID-19 “Variant of Interest”
After increasing in prevalence during the early months of 2023, the Omicron descendent XBB.1.16 is now a variant of interest, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced. XBB.1.16, a combination of 2 BA.2 lineages, accounted for 4.15% of COVID-19 cases worldwide as of mid-April, with more than 2.8 million new infections and 18 000 deaths reported during that time. More than 30 countries have reported XBB.1.16 cases, the majority of which are in India.

The current global risk assessment for XBB.1.16 is low, although the WHO warned that the variant might continue to spread and contribute to an increase in cases due to its “growth advantage and immune escape properties.”

Overall, cases and deaths from COVID-19 declined globally from mid-March to mid-April, with more than 2.8 million new infections and 18 000 deaths reported during that time. Southeast Asia and Eastern Mediterranean regions, along with a handful of individual countries where cases and deaths have increased, are exceptions, according to the WHO’s epidemiological update. – Emily Harris

Published Online: May 3, 2023.

Note: Source references are available through embedded hyperlinks in the article text online.