Welcome to Federal Health Update. This newsletter is a compilation of the latest news in the federal health care sector.

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EXECUTIVE AND CONGRESSIONAL NEWS

- On Jan. 1, 2019, Acting Defense Secretary Patrick M. Shanahan took the helm of the Defense Department.

MILITARY HEALTH CARE NEWS

- Traumatic brain injuries continue to be a top focus in the Defense Health Agency. According to the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center, or DVBIC, more than 380,000 service members have been diagnosed with a TBI since 2000.

  The majority of the incidents have occurred in noncombat events including training accidents, falls, motor vehicle collisions, and sports-related activities.

  TBIs are categorized as mild, moderate, severe, or penetrating. They occur when a blow or jolt to the head disrupts normal brain functioning. Mild TBIs or mTBI, also known as concussions, are the most common TBI among military members, DVBIC says. Full recovery is usually expected within days or weeks, but mTBIs can cause cognitive and emotional issues, such as temporary memory gaps, slowed thinking, irritability, and depression.

  Further, research has shown that repeated head trauma may increase the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease, and also may lead to brain degeneration known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

  Here's a look at some activities this year that were related to promoting better understanding and treatment of TBI:
The U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command began limited user testing of a blood test for brain trauma. The Army and the Department of Defense funded the research that led to the development of the test, called a brain trauma indicator. The BTI identifies two brain-specific protein markers that rapidly appear in the blood and are elevated 12 hours after a head injury occurs.

The Air Force opened its first Invisible Wounds Center at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. The facility serves as a regional treatment center for TBI as well as associated pain conditions and psychological injuries. With a team of 18 specialties under one roof, the center combines conventional and complementary therapies to provide treatment that's individually tailored to each patient as well as holistic and integrated.

During this year's Military Health System Research Symposium, a researcher at Indiana University was recognized for his work advancing the biological understanding of head impacts that don't produce clinical symptoms of mTBI. Keisuke Kawata, Ph.D., of the Department of Kinesiology, School of Public Health, Indiana University, received the first-place award in the Young Investigator Competition for his study, “Association of Increased Serum S100B Levels with High School Football Subconcussive Head Impacts.”

- The Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) has launched its second survey of TRICARE beneficiaries to learn how changes to the TRICARE program in 2018 has impacted beneficiaries.

As of Jan. 1, 2018, the TRICARE Standard and TRICARE Extra were combined into the new TRICARE Select program. In addition, the regions collapsed into two (East and West) – affecting access to medical providers, co-payments increased for TRICARE Select, TRICARE Retiree Prime and the TRICARE Pharmacy program.

The survey explores beneficiaries' satisfaction with various aspects of the program, such as the cost of care, the cost of medications, the choice of medical providers and overall satisfaction with the Tricare Select, Tricare Prime and Tricare for Life programs.

In its last survey in June 2018, MOAA saw increasing dissatisfaction with certain aspects of Tricare, although those using Tricare for Life are generally highly satisfied. Tricare for Life is for beneficiaries age 65 and older.

The results of the online survey are anonymous, and MOAA seeks input from as many beneficiaries as possible to help them track the effects of Tricare changes so that they can help advocate for needed changes to improve access and quality of health care for the military community.

To participate in the survey, please visit: https://survey.highroadsolution.com/f/1353941/3a3b/

VETERANS AFFAIRS NEWS

- On Dec. 28, 2019, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) awarded contracts to manage provider networks for Regions 1, 2 and 3 of VA’s new Community Care Network (CCN), the department's direct link with community providers that will ensure VA provides the right care at the right time to veterans.

The network will be the standard contract vehicle allowing VA to purchase care for veterans from community health care providers using industry-standard approaches and guidelines in support of the VA MISSION Act of 2018 to administer services and manage the network to its full potential. VA will provide care coordination under this new contract.
TriWest Healthcare Alliance has expanded its network to support veteran and provider care coordination across the nation until CCN is fully implemented.

Contracts for Regions 1-3 were awarded to Optum Public Sector Solutions, Inc. The contract award for Region 4 is expected by early April 2019. Contract award for Regions 5 and 6 are expected by end of calendar year 2019.

- Region 2 covers Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin.
- Region 3 will serve Veterans in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, Tennessee and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

- The U.S Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) established a partnership with the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) to promote and support veterans by providing new physical therapy resources.

  The partnership coordinates strengths of both organizations to benefit all veterans and their families, physical therapists (PT) and physical therapist assistants by helping to raise awareness of physical therapy and create new employment and practice opportunities.

  The agreement will use VA and APTA resources to promote non-pharmacological treatment options for pain, VA's suicide prevention efforts, utilization of VA's Adaptive Sports Grants Program and physical therapists' participation in VA's National Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events.

  VA employs over 3,500 physical therapists and PT assistants, and offers the largest Physical Therapy Residency Program in the nation.

  APTA represents more than 100,000 physical therapists, PT assistants and students of physical therapy nationwide. Its mission is to advance the profession of physical therapy and to improve the health of society.

  For more information visit: [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov) or [https://www.apta.org/](https://www.apta.org/).

**GENERAL HEALTH CARE NEWS**

- The Pain Management Best Practices Inter-Agency Task Force (Task Force) issued a draft report issued calling for individualized, patient-centered pain management to improve the lives of millions of individuals who experience acute and chronic pain.

  Members of the public will have 90 days to provide comments on the draft report's proposed recommendations.

  The Task Force, a federal advisory committee, was established by the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016 to propose updates to best practices and issue recommendations that address gaps or inconsistencies for managing chronic and acute pain. The Task Force is composed of 29 members, including healthcare providers and patients, as well as federal employees. It is overseen by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the U.S. Department of Defense.

  The draft report contains proposed recommendations in a number of areas, including:
The Task Force members have significant public- and private-sector experience across the disciplines of pain management, patient advocacy, substance use disorders, mental health and minority health.

For more information on the Task Force, visit its webpage. To read the draft report, please visit: https://www.hhs.gov/ash/advisory-committees/pain/reports/2018-12-draft-report-on-updates-gaps-inconsistencies-recommendations/index.html

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Service (CMS) announced 8.4 million people selected or were automatically re-enrolled in plans using the HealthCare.gov platform during the 2019 open enrollment period.

Nearly 2.1 million new consumers enrolled in the healthcare plan and 6.3 million renewed their coverage.

For state-level data, please visit: https://www.cms.gov/newsroom/fact-sheets/final-weekly-enrollment-snapshot-2019-enrollment-period

REPORTS/POLICIES

- The National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine published “Understanding and Overcoming the Challenge of Obesity and Overweight in the Armed Forces: Proceedings of a Workshop,” on January 3, 2019. This report examines how obesity and overweight are measured in the armed forces and how they affect recruitment, retention, resilience, and readiness; discussed service-specific issues related to these problems and highlighted innovative strategies to address them through improved nutrition, physical activity, and stress management; and offered perspectives from outside of the armed forces on approaches to prevent and treat obesity. http://nationalacademies.org/hmd/reports/2019/understanding-and-overcoming-challenge-of-obesity-and-overweight-in-armed-forces-proceedings.aspx

HILL HEARINGS

- There are no health-related hearings scheduled next week.
There was no legislation proposed last week.

MEETINGS


If you need further information on any item in the *Federal Health Update*, please contact Kate Theroux at (703) 447-3257 or by e-mail at katetheroux@federalhealthcarenews.com.