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

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Best Wishes for a Happy Thanksgiving!

EXECUTIVE AND CONGRESSIONAL NEWS

- There was no Congressional or Executive Agency health-related news this week.

MILITARY HEALTH CARE NEWS

- The Defense Health Agency is recognizing November as Warrior Care Month, highlighting a program designed to specifically help and support caregivers.

The Military Caregiver Personalized Experiences, Engagement and Resources Forum Initiative, or PEER Forum was established in June 2014 and championed in large part by former First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden. PEER Forums provide military caregivers a forum for them to share experiences and provide each other support. According to Sandra Mason, director, Recovery Coordination Program, Defense Health Agency, PEER Forums are a confidential portal to help for all caregivers.

PEER Forums are available to anyone caring for a wounded, ill or injured service member and are not restricted to family members. “Anyone who helps care for a recovering service member, in any capacity, is considered a caregiver and encouraged to participate (in a Forum),” Mason said. “That being said, caregivers are busy individuals with hectic schedules, so we try to accommodate them as best as possible. There is always value in sharing information and encouraging caregivers to seek out additional local supports.”
Mason says the PEER Forums, which are open to those in either the active or reserve components, are producing positive support and it the benefits are clear. “By forming small communities of support for each other we’ve seen caregivers begin to flourish in their new role, and as individuals. We’ve seen caregivers encourage each other to go to school, look for jobs that are conducive to their schedules, become well known activists for the military community and advocate on Capitol Hill for additional support for military caregivers across the country. By helping one another, many caregivers are helping themselves and are encouraged and inspired to be the best advocate and support for their recovering service member.”

One of the challenges Mason says with PEER Forums is getting the word out to caregivers. Communities across America can encourage caregivers to participate in PEER Forums.

“One while caregivers provide this support willingly, they also need time for themselves and time to engage with other caregivers and the community at-large. The need for respite care is a big issue for our caregivers and the community should take note and help support,” Mason said. “It is imperative that we collectively support our military caregivers, bolster their strength, give them opportunities to connect with their peers, and provide guidance and resources to help them care for themselves, as well as their service member.”

To learn more about PEER Forums and to see the one closest to you go to DoD Warrior Care.

VETERANS AFFAIRS NEWS

- The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program has made significant improvements in disability claim processing over the past year, with most service members who submitted claims through the program receiving decisions within 30 days of discharge.

BDD allows service members to file a claim for disability between 90 and 180 days prior to discharge from active duty, which provides time for paperwork review and medical exams prior to leaving.

In fiscal year (FY) 2018, the first full year of the revamped program, more than 36,000 service members submitted claims through BDD and about 53 percent of completed claims received a decision on their claim within 30 days. In the first month of FY 2019, 3,437 claims were completed with 57.7 percent completed within 30 days.

Throughout FY 2018, the program made continuous improvements, which include:

  - Expanding BDD claim review from two locations, to processing at any regional office
  - Enhanced software partnerships with the Department of Defense to improve record transfers
  - Additional claim training and performance standards for military service coordinators.

By participating in BDD, service members ensure that their disability medical exams become part of their service treatment record and that service connection for their conditions may be established as early as possible. Medical conditions can get worse over time and establishing eligibility at discharge may make it easier to increase disability ratings in the future.

For more information on the BDD program, visit www.benefits.va.gov/predischarge/claims-predischarge-benefits-delivery-at-discharge.asp.

- The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ (VA) announced plans to realign several programs within its Veterans Health Administration (VHA) into four offices.
A requirement of Executive Order 13781, Comprehensive Plan for Reorganizing the Executive Branch, the realignment, which will begin on Nov. 25, is designed to enhance quality care for veterans by improving coordination of services in the areas of population health; education and training of health care professionals; research, academic affiliations; engineering services; and human resources (HR).

- Population Health will consolidate six programs into one new office to reduce administrative burden on the Veterans Integrated Services Networks (VISNs) and hospitals. This consolidation will enable facilities to target issues common to their market area and, based on the populations’ health in the region, align with other federal agencies to promote best practices based on public and private institutional standards.

- The Office of Academic Affiliations (OAA) and Office of Research and Development (ORD) will realign under the new Discovery, Education and Affiliates Networks (DEAN) office to foster a collaborative environment that will address the most complex health concerns facing veterans, while improving medical care for all Americans. This office will be led by Dr. Carolyn M. Clancy.

- Engineering and Environment of Care functions will be integrated into a single office to improve coordination between related environmental and safety initiatives and provide a world-class health care environment. VA Medical Centers will now have a single point of contact for safety issues. The consolidation of functions also will ensure high-quality safety standards, which are essential to veterans’ health.

- HR will merge four headquarters-based HR groups with similar functions into one office to create a more efficient HR organization and provide more transparent and consistent service. A more efficiently functioning HR Service in VHA will improve the quality and efficiency of central office functions, which are essential to VA providing high-quality health care to veterans.

**GENERAL HEALTH CARE NEWS**

- **CDC Director Robert R. Redfield, M.D., announced the establishment of an Acute Flaccid Myelitis (AFM) Task Force (Task Force) to aid in the ongoing investigation to define the cause of, and improve treatment and outcomes for, patients with AFM.**

  The AFM Task Force will bring together experts from a variety of scientific, medical, and public health disciplines to help solve this critical public health issue.

  The Task Force will convene under CDC’s Office of Infectious Diseases’ Board of Scientific Counselors (BSC), and will make key recommendations to the BSC to inform and strengthen CDC’s response to this urgent public health concern. It will be coordinated by the Office of the Director and is scheduled to submit its first report at the BSC’s December 6, 2018, public meeting in Atlanta.

  AFM is a rare condition that affects a person’s nervous system, specifically, the spinal cord, causing weakness in one or more limbs. Beginning in 2014, the United States has seen an increased number of AFM cases, mostly in children. In 2018, there have been 106 confirmed cases of AFM in 29 states; all but five have been in children ages 18 or younger.

- **The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) announced upcoming efforts to support better care and outcomes for nursing home residents under the Civil Money Penalty Reinvestment Program (CMPRP).**

  This three-year initiative aims to improve residents’ quality of life by equipping nursing home staff, administrators and stakeholders with technical tools and assistance to enhance resident
As part of the CMPRP, CMS will develop a variety of work products for nursing home professionals, such as staff competency assessment tools, instructional guides, training webinars and technical assistance seminars. These supports aim to help staff reduce adverse events, improve dementia care and strengthen staffing quality, including by reducing staff turnover and enhancing performance.

The CMPRP is funded by federal civil money penalties, which are fines nursing homes must pay CMS by law when they are noncompliant with certain regulations and there are serious concerns about the safety and quality of care they provide. Most penalties collected are returned to states to fund state-based projects that benefit nursing home residents, and CMS retains a portion of the funds for similar federal initiatives. Under this new program, CMS will collaborate with industry experts to develop an ongoing series of toolkits and technical assistance intended to help nursing home staff and management improve care delivery and thereby residents’ quality of life.

CMS released its first toolkit in the CMPRP series, the Nursing Home Staff Competency Assessment and its supporting materials. The competency assessment is designed to help nursing home frontline and management staff evaluate their skills. It includes several questions to gauge staff knowledge about behavioral, technical and resident-based capabilities. Additional toolkits will follow under the series heading “Building on a Culture of Quality: Your Guide to Resident-Centered Care.”

For additional information on the Civil Money Penalty Reinvestment Program, please visit https://www.cms.gov/Medicare/Provider-Enrollment-and-Certification/SurveyCertificationGenInfo/LTC-CMP-Reinvestment.html.

- The U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved Daurismo (glasdegib) tablets to be used in combination with low-dose cytarabine (LDAC), a type of chemotherapy, for the treatment of newly-diagnosed acute myeloid leukemia (AML) in adults who are 75 years of age or older or who have other chronic health conditions or diseases (comorbidities) that may preclude the use of intensive chemotherapy.

AML is a rapidly progressing cancer that forms in the bone marrow and results in an increased number of abnormal white blood cells in the bloodstream and bone marrow. The National Cancer Institute at the National Institutes of Health estimates that in 2018, approximately 19,520 people will be diagnosed with AML and approximately 10,670 patients with AML will die of the disease. Almost half of the adults diagnosed with AML are not treated with intensive chemotherapy because of comorbidities and chemotherapy related toxicities.

The efficacy of Daurismo was studied in a randomized clinical trial in which 111 adult patients with newly diagnosed AML were treated with either Daurismo in combination with LDAC or LDAC alone. The trial measured overall survival (OS) from the date of randomization to death from any cause. Results demonstrated a significant improvement in OS in patients treated with Daurismo. The median OS was 8.3 months for patients treated with Daurismo plus LDAC compared with 4.3 months for patients treated with LDAC only.

The FDA granted this application Priority Review designation. Daurismo also received Orphan Drug designation, which provides incentives to assist and encourage the development of drugs for rare diseases.

The FDA granted the approval of Daurismo to Pfizer.

### HILL HEARINGS

- The Senate Committee on Health Education, Labor and Pension will hold a hearing on Nov. 28, 2018, to examine reducing health care costs, focusing on improving affordability through innovation.
- The Senate Armed Services Committee will hold a hearing on Nov. 29, 2018, to examine the nomination of Thomas McCaffery be an assistant secretary of defense for health affairs.

### LEGISLATION

- **H.R.7141** (introduced Nov. 16, 2018): the *Workplace Violence Prevention for Health Care and Social Service Workers Act* was referred to the Committees on Education and the Workforce, Energy and Commerce and Ways and Means. Sponsor: Representative Joe Courtney [D-CT-2]

### MEETINGS

- The 2018 AMSUS Annual Continuing Education Meeting will be held on Nov. 26-30, 2018, at the Gaylord National Harbor, Md. [http://www.amsusmeetings.org/home-2/](http://www.amsusmeetings.org/home-2/)
- HIMSS 2019 Annual Conference will be held on Feb. 11-15, 2018, in Orlando, Fla. [http://www.himssconference.org/](http://www.himssconference.org/)

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