Executive and Congressional News

- **The Senate resumed consideration of S.1867, the National Defense Authorization Act this week.**

- **The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee held a hearing on Nov. 30, 2011 to discuss wait times and other access issues for veterans seeking mental health care. Following the testimony of a number of VA staff, Committee Chair Sen. Patty Murray said she would request the Office of Inspector General to examine the wait-time issue. Committee Ranking Member Richard Burr asked for a “detailed audit” of how the VHA has spent the additional money provided by Congress to expand the provision of mental health care.**

- **Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz) has proposed an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2012 to further raise TRICARE fees. About 586,000 retirees of working age are paying annual family premiums of $520, up from $460, and individual premiums of $260, up from $230. Pharmacy co-pays also rose between $2 and $3. The higher fees for the program’s popular HMO are part of a Defense Department effort to slash personnel costs by billions of dollars. Premiums had not been changed in 17 years. The fiscal 2012 Defense Authorization bill under debate in the Senate this week includes language that would hold down costs by capping increases at the rate of the cost-of-living adjustment in military retired pay. McCain has proposed an amendment that would tie increases to the annual growth in health costs, estimated at 6 percent a year. The Pentagon agrees. The amendment has drawn fire from military service groups, who argue that inexpensive lifetime health care was part of a deal they made with the government for risking their lives on the battlefield.**

Military Health Care News

- **On Dec. 7, the Army will promote Maj. Gen. Patricia Horoho to the rank of lieutenant general and swear her in as the first nurse to serve as Army Surgeon General. Horoho is a 1982 graduate of the University of North Carolina School of Nursing. Horoho’s previous commands include: Commander, Western Regional Medical Command, Fort Lewis, Wash., from 2008 to 2010; Commander, Madigan Army Medical Center, Tacoma, Wash., from 2008 to 2009; Commander, Walter Reed Health Care System, Washington, D.C., from 2007 to 2008; and Commander, DeWitt Health Care Network, Fort Belvoir, Va., from 2004 to 2006. Horoho succeeds Lt. Gen. Eric Schoomaker, who has served as Army Surgeon General since December 2007.**

- **TRICARE Management Activity announced that TRICARE Young Adult (TYA) Prime option is available for purchase on Dec. 1, 2011, with coverage beginning Jan. 1, 2012. TYA Prime will offer young eligible adult beneficiaries TRICARE Prime coverage for monthly premiums of $201. To purchase TYA Prime, dependents must be under age 26, unmarried and not eligible for their own employer-sponsored health care coverage. TYA Prime is a managed health care option with low out-of-pocket costs. Care is delivered through military clinics and hospitals and the TRICARE network of civilian providers. Uniformed services dependents may qualify to purchase TYA Prime if they live in a designated Prime Service Area and their sponsor’s status makes them eligible for Prime coverage. In addition to TYA Prime, young adult dependents may also be eligible for TYA Standard, which has been available since May 2011. With monthly premiums of $186, Standard offers eligible dependents the flexibility to see TRICARE-authorized network and non-network providers of their choice, wherever they live or travel. The Standard monthly premium is dropping to $176 on Jan. 1, 2012. TYA Prime enrollment will follow the TRICARE Prime “20th of the month rule.” As long as the TYA enrollment application is received by the 20th of the month, coverage can begin on the first day of the next month. Once an initial payment is made, monthly premiums must be paid in advance through automated electronic payment. Complete information and application forms are available at www.tricare.mil/tya.**

- **The U.S. government has agreed to pay the widow and family of the first victim of the 2001 anthrax attack $2.5 million to settle their lawsuit.**

  Sen. Stevens’ widow, Maureen Stevens, sued the government in 2003, claiming its negligence caused her husband’s death by failing to adequately safeguard anthrax spores. Ivins was a Fort Detrick scientist who committed suicide in 2008. The FBI probe concluded that Fort Detrick was the source of the anthrax spores used in the attacks in New York, Washington and Florida. Although some of his colleagues and outside experts have raised doubts about his intent and ability to weaponize the anthrax, the FBI formally closed its “Amerithrax” investigation in 2010. Ivins killed himself with an overdose of Tylenol and valium as investigators closed in. His attorney has maintained Ivins is innocent, but Justice Department prosecutors say they had more than enough evidence to convict him at trial. Stevens’ attorney, Richard Schuler, said when the FBI announced that Ivins was their man that it proved a key allegation in their lawsuit: “We’ve maintained all along this was an inside job,” he said. Schuler called the settlement a “tremendous victory” for the Stevens family after years of litigation. Government attorneys who handled the Stevens settlement said in the court papers that it is not “an admission of liability or fault on the part of the United States” and that the intent of the deal was “avoiding the expenses and risks of further litigation.” The settlement avoids a trial that had been set for early 2012.
The 377th Medical Group has received nine Air Force Materiel Command medical service awards for 2011:

- The Biomedical Specialist Category I Officer of the year is Lt. Col. Linda Bonnel, 377th Aerospace Medicine Squadron
- The Biomedical Science Corps Category I Team of the Year is the 377 MDG
- The Dental Civilian of the Year is Lisa Espana, 377th Dental Squadron
- The Outstanding Dental Armman of the Year is Senior Armman Joshua Harrell, 377 DS
- The Pharmacy Technician noncommissioned officer of the year is Tech. Sgt. Lesani Guevarra, 377th Medical Support Squadron
- The Physical Medicine Apprentice is Senior Armman Andrew Rother, 377th Medical Operations Squadron
- The Physical Medicine Craftsman is Tech. Sgt. Amy Cottom, 377 MDG
- The Public Health NCO of the Year is Tech. Sgt. Tiffany Gregory, 377th Air Base Wing, formerly of the 377AMDS
- The Clinical Excellence Field Grade Officer is Maj. Lauren Wolf, 377 MDOS

The 377th Medical Group provides daily operational medical support to the 377th Air Base Wing and over 100 associate organizations. Additionally, the group provides primary health care to patients enrolled in TRICARE Prime and assigned to Kirtland AFB clinic, and temporary duty personnel.

Veterans Health Care News

- The Department of Veterans Affairs has reached 89 percent of its project milestones for fiscal year 2012.

VA started its Performance Management and Accountability System (PMAS) in 2009. At that point, VA was on schedule on fewer than 30 percent of its IT milestones. By moving to a much more dynamic model for how it allocates its resources for developing technology projects, instead of keeping individuals tasked to one project at a time, the department has moved to a model that moves its talent and dollars around in a much more dynamic fashion, based on the organization's most pressing needs.

Additionally, projects that continue to languish and eat up budget dollars without producing new capabilities are cancelled. VA cancelled or paused 45 IT projects in the opening stages of the project in 2009.

The PMAS approach now applies to all of VA's technology development projects.

- A growing number of women veterans seek health care at VA hospitals and clinics nationwide, as more women join the military and take on de facto combat roles in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the past decade, the number of women veterans using VA health services has doubled, from almost 160,000 to 315,000. VA officials say they expect the number to double again in the next few years.

In World War II, Korea and Vietnam, only about 3 percent of service members were women. Women now make up 15 percent of all active-duty service members; 18 percent of the National Guard and Reserves; and six percent of VA patients.

In response to this influx, the VA is stepping up efforts to accommodate female veterans and developing programs especially designed for women wrestling with serious PTSD, traumatic brain injury, substance abuse, depression or sexual trauma.

Health Care News

- The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) awarded nearly $220 million in Affordable Insurance Exchange grants to 13 states to help them create exchanges, giving these states more flexibility and resources to implement the Affordable Care Act.

The health care reform law gives states the freedom to design Affordable Insurance Exchanges – one-stop marketplaces where consumers can choose a private health insurance plan that fits their health needs and have the same kinds of insurance choices as members of Congress.

The department also published several Frequently Asked Questions, providing answers to key questions states need to know as they work to set up these new marketplaces. Critics among these are that states that run exchanges have more options than originally proposed when it comes to determining eligibility for tax credits and Medicaid.

And states have more time to apply for “Level One” exchange grants.

In response to this new funding, the VA is stepping up efforts to accommodate female veterans and developing programs especially designed for women wrestling with serious PTSD, traumatic brain injury, substance abuse, depression or sexual trauma.

- To read the final decision on the new national coverage determination, visit the CMS website at: http://tinyurl.com/bq68zq.

- The number of parents who skip the shots continues to grow, according to a new analysis by The Associated Press.

In more than half of the states, the number of parents opting to skip some or all childhood vaccines is rising. And in eight states, more than 1 in 20 public school children do not get the vaccines that are required for kindergarten attendance.

Overall, childhood vaccination rates remain high, at 90 percent or better for several vaccines, including those for polio, measles, hepatitis B and chickenpox. In many states, exemptions are filed for fewer than 1 percent of children entering school for the first time.

Health officials worry particularly when state exemption rates climb beyond 5 percent.

In some rural counties in northeast Washington, for example, vaccination exemption rates in recent years have been above 20 percent and even as high as 50 percent.

To learn more about the growing reluctance to vaccinate, read the full report, “Fear of Disease Outbreak? Half of States See Rise in Kids Skipping School Shots.”

- Nancy Munro, an acute care nurse practitioner at the National Institutes of Health Clinical Center, is one of 10 recipients of Washingtonian magazine's 2011 Excellence in Nursing Award.

Munro is the senior nurse practitioner in the Critical Care Medicine Department and on the Pulmonary Consult Service. She was the first nurse practitioner on the Surgical Critical Care Service at Washington Hospital Center and then worked at Inova Alexandria Hospital before joining the NIH Clinical Center in 2004.

In addition to her full-time position at the Clinical Center, Munro is a clinical instructor in the Acute Care Nursing Practitioner/Clinical Nurse Specialist Graduate Program at the University of Maryland School of Nursing in Baltimore.

She has made significant contributions to the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, serving on the group’s national board of directors and chairing various work groups that wrote standards for care delivery and identified important education topics.

Munro earned a bachelor’s in nursing from Villanova University, Philadelphia, and a master’s in nursing at Emory University, Atlanta. Munro got her acute care nurse practitioner certificate in 1997 from Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., just as the field was emerging.

- On Nov. 30, 2011, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the first generic version of the cholesterol-lowering drug Lipitor (atorvastatin calcium tablets).

Ranbaxy Laboratories Ltd. has gained approval to make generic atorvastatin calcium tablets in 10 milligram, 20 mg, 40 mg, and 80 mg strengths. The drug will be manufactured by Ohm Laboratories in New Brunswick, N.J.
People with high blood cholesterol levels have a greater chance of getting heart disease. By itself, the condition usually has no signs or symptoms. Thus, many people do not know that their cholesterol levels are too high.

Atorvastatin is a statin, a type of drug that lowers cholesterol in the body by blocking an enzyme in the liver. Atorvastatin is used along with a low-fat diet to lower the LDL cholesterol and triglycerides in the blood. The drug can raise HDL cholesterol as well. Atorvastatin lowers the risk for heart attack, stroke, certain types of heart surgery, and chest pain in patients who have heart disease or risk factors for heart disease such as age, smoking, high blood pressure, low HDL, or family history of early heart disease.

Generic drugs approved by FDA have the same high quality and strength as brand-name drugs. The generic manufacturing and packaging sites must pass the same quality standards as those of brand-name drugs.

**Nancy Mahon has been appointed as the new chair of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA).**

Mahon, executive director of the M•A•C AIDS Fund, has many years of experience in leading large philanthropic endeavors. In her role as chair, she will maintain the continuity of PACHA-related activities and, on occasion, represent the administration at PACHA-related events.

As a senior vice president at M•A•C and executive director of the M•A•C AIDS Fund, Mahon serves as a member of the board's senior management team, while overseeing the strategic direction and day-to-day operation of the M•A•C AIDS Fund. Currently, the fund gives away over $18 million annually throughout the world, particularly in the 65 countries in which M•A•C has affiliates. Before joining M•A•C in June 2006, Ms. Mahon was executive director of God's Love We Deliver (GLWD), the nation's oldest and largest provider of life-sustaining nutritional support services for people living with HIV/AIDS, cancer, and other serious illnesses.

PACHA was established to provide policy recommendations on the U.S. government's response to the AIDS epidemic. The council provides advice, information, and recommendations to the HHS Secretary on programs and policies intended to promote effective prevention of HIV disease, and to advance research on the treatment of HIV disease and AIDS. The HHS Secretary selects members and the chair for their expertise in, or knowledge of, HIV/AIDS issues. The council may have up to 25 members, including the chair. In addition, the Secretary can appoint ex officio members from relevant HHS programs.

For more information about PACHA, visit [http://www.aids.gov/federal-resources/bodies/pacha/](http://www.aids.gov/federal-resources/bodies/pacha/).

### Reserve/Guard

- As of Nov. 29, 2010, the total number of Guard and Reserve currently on active duty has decreased by 36 to 94,560. The totals for each service are Army National Guard and Army 68,491; Navy Reserve, 4,563; Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve, 10,116; Marine Corps Reserve, 5,969, and the Coast Guard Reserve, 789. [www.defense.gov](http://www.defense.gov).

### Reports/Policies

- **The GAO published "Mental Health and Substance Use: Employers' Insurance Coverage Maintained or Enhanced Since Parity Act, but Effect of Coverage on Enrollees Varied," (GAO-12-63) on Nov. 1, 2011.** This report describes the extent to which insurers cover MHSU through private health insurance plans, and how this coverage has changed since 2008; and what is known about the effect of health insurance coverage for MHSU on enrollees' health care expenditures; access to, or use of, MHSU services; and health status. [http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d1263.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d1263.pdf)


- **The GAO published "Private Health Insurance: Early Indicators Show That Most Insurers Would Have Met or Exceeded New Medical Loss Ratio Standards," (GAO-12-99R) on Nov. 30, 2011.** In this report, GAO answers what can be learned from the 2010 MLR data regarding how reported MLR data varied by different insurer characteristics, and to what extent did the credibility adjustment, PRACA MLR formula, and reporting requirements affect insurers’ 2010 MLRs. [http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d1299r.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d1299r.pdf)

### Hill Hearings

- **The Institute of Medicine published "Information Sharing and Collaboration: Applications to Integrated Biosurveillance - Workshop Summary," on Nov. 30, 2011.** This report examines the strengths and limitations of different models of information analysis, control, and distribution; considers examples and lessons learned from other similar information sharing collaborations; explores approaches to developing an effective and sustainable concept of operations that includes join rules, procedures, and performance measures; and illustrates the value added in collaboration through scenarios and real-life examples. [http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2011/Information-Sharing-and-Collaboration-Applications-to-Integrated-Biosurveillance.aspx](http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2011/Information-Sharing-and-Collaboration-Applications-to-Integrated-Biosurveillance.aspx)

### Legislation

- **H.R.3511 (Introduced Nov. 29, 2011): the Cardiac Arrest Survival Act of 2011 was referred to the House Committee on Energy and Commerce**
- **H.R.3514 (Introduced Nov. 29, 2011): the Everson Walls and Ron Springs Gift for Life Act of 2011 was referred to the House Committee on Energy and Commerce**
- **H.R.3524 (Introduced Nov. 30, 2011): To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide certain rights for persons who receive treatment for illnesses, injuries, and disabilities incurred in or aggravated by service in the uniformed services, and for other purposes was referred to the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs**
- **H.R.3526 (Introduced Nov. 30, 2011): To amend the Public Health Service Act to improve women's health by prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of heart disease, stroke, and other cardiovascular diseases in women and for other purposes was referred to the House Committee on Energy and Commerce**

### Hall Hearings

- **Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) 22nd Annual Forum on Quality Improvement in Health Care will be held Dec. 4-7, 2011, in Orlando, Fla.** [http://www.IHI.org/offerings/Conferences/Forum2011/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.IHI.org/offerings/Conferences/Forum2011/Pages/default.aspx)
- **mHealth Summit will held on Dec. 5-7, 2011, in Washington, D.C.** [http://www.mhealthsummit.org/](http://www.mhealthsummit.org/)
- **2012 Military Health System Conference will be held Jan. 30 - Feb. 2, 2012, in National Harbor, Md.** [www.tricare.mil](http://www.tricare.mil)
- **Digital Health Communication Extravaganza will be held on Feb. 15-17, 2012, in Orlando, Fla.** [http://conferences.dce.uf Sanford.edu/](http://conferences.dce.uf Sanford.edu/)
- **The International Conference on Emerging Infectious Diseases 2012 (ICID) will be held on March 15-14, 2012, in Atlanta, Ga.** [http://www.cdc.gov/eid/content/16/11/e1.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/eid/content/16/11/e1.htm)
- **Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) 25th Annual Conference will be held on March 24-28, 2012, in Atlanta, Ga.** [http://www.bfrf25.org](http://www.bfrf25.org)
- **The 15th International Congress on Infectious Diseases (ICID) will be held on June 13-16, 2012, in Bangkok, Thailand.** [http://www.isid.org/15th ICID](http://www.isid.org/15th ICID)