

American Nephrology Nurses Association

Weekly Capitol Hill Update – Monday, April 23, 2018

Congressional Schedule

Senate

- Senate convenes 3 pm; first votes 5:30 pm

House

- House meets 3 pm in pro forma session; lawmakers return Tuesday at noon

Legislative Update

- **Week in Review**
 - *Cornyn backs Wyden's call to have drug executives testify before Senate panel.* "Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn said Thursday that he is open to summoning drug company executives to testify before Congress on the opioid epidemic, an idea suggested by Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) earlier during a Senate Finance Committee hearing on the opioid crisis, but Cornyn also wants to see funding for border security."
 - Read more: <https://morningconsult.com/2018/04/19/cornyn-backs-wydens-call-have-drug-executives-testify-before-senate-panel/>
 - *Dem. Senators unveil expanded public option for health insurance.* "A group of Democratic senators on Wednesday introduced an expanded public option for health insurance as the party debates the next steps to build on ObamaCare. The new proposal, called the Choose Medicare Act, was introduced by Sens. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) and Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.), both seen as potential presidential contenders, though Murphy has said he is not running in 2020."
 - Read more: <http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/383764-dem-senators-unveil-expanded-public-option-for-health-insurance>
 - *Senate Finance panel's opioid hearing to focus on changes to Medicare, Medicaid.* "As the Senate Finance Committee prepares for its first hearing this

year on the opioid crisis Thursday morning, members will bring up changes the panel wants to make this spring in four policy areas, including to Medicare and Medicaid, that are outlined in a document obtained by Morning Consult.”

- Read more: <https://morningconsult.com/2018/04/19/senate-finance-panels-first-opioid-hearing-focus-changes-medicare-medicaid/>
- **Warren, Cummings seek \$100B to fight opioid epidemic.** “Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) and Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Md.) introduced a bill to provide \$100 billion in funding over 10 years to address the opioid crisis. This legislation would amount to a significant infusion of new federal dollars aimed at curbing the opioid crisis, which is leading to thousands of deaths each year.”
 - Read more: <http://thehill.com/business-a-lobbying/383787-warren-cummings-seek-100b-to-fight-opioid-epidemic>
- **Senators push HHS to negotiate lower prices on opioid overdose reversal drug.** “A group of senators is urging the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to take measures to reduce the price of a potentially life-saving medication reversing the effects of an opioid overdose. An estimated 115 people die per day of an overdose involving an opioid. Sens. Angus King (I-Maine) and Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and 13 Democratic senators signed a letter from Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) to call on HHS to negotiate a cheaper price for naloxone, which comes in the form of an injection or a nasal spray and is used to reverse opioid overdoses.”
 - Read more: <http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/383804-senate-dems-to-hhs-negotiate-lower-price-of-opioid-overdose-reversal-drug>
- **HHS Secretary Azar readmitted to hospital.** “Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Alex Azar has been readmitted to the hospital for an intestinal condition. Azar was initially admitted over the weekend, but was released and has been working from home in Indiana. He has since been readmitted for additional treatment and observation, according to HHS spokeswoman Caitlin Oakley. Azar has diverticulitis, an infection of pouches in the colon that can be painful.”
 - Read more: <http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/383723-hhs-secretary-readmitted-to-hospital>
- **Week Ahead**
 - **House panel to mark up opioid bills next week.** “A House Energy and Commerce subcommittee will mark up legislation next Wednesday aimed at combating the opioid epidemic. The April 25 markup in the panel’s health subcommittee comes as the panel's chairman pushes forward with his target of bringing a bill to the House floor by Memorial Day weekend. So far, lawmakers have reviewed more than 60 bills over three legislative hearings.”

- Read more: <http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/383619-house-panel-to-mark-up-opioid-bills-next-week>
- ***GOP in retreat on ObamaCare.*** “Republicans are retreating from calls to repeal ObamaCare ahead of this year’s midterm elections. Less than a year after the GOP gave up on its legislative effort to repeal the law, Democrats are going on offense on this issue, attacking Republicans for their votes as they hope to retake the House majority.”
 - Read more: <http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/384032-gop-in-retreat-on-obamacare>
- ***Trump’s VA pick pledges opposition to privatization, Senator says.*** “President Trump’s pick to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) told a Democratic senator on Tuesday he opposes efforts to privatize veterans health care. White House physician Ronny Jackson is visiting with Republican and Democratic senators this week ahead of his April 25 confirmation hearing.”
 - Read more: <http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/383585-trumps-va-pick-pledges-opposition-to-privatization-senator-says>
- ***Trump delays drug pricing speech, no set date yet.*** “U.S. President Donald Trump has postponed a speech on lowering prescription drug prices previously scheduled for Thursday to a date in the near future, the White House said on Sunday. The White House did not provide a date or time frame for when the speech would take place, and did not say why it had been pushed back. The address would have been Trump's first about lowering drug prices, one of the main issues he campaigned on during the 2016 presidential race.”
 - Read more: <http://news.trust.org//item/20180423141208-6h1e5/>
- ***House seeks comments on health care cybersecurity challenges.*** “The House Energy & Commerce Committee today requested information from stakeholders on the cybersecurity challenges presented by legacy health care technologies and medical devices, and potential policies to address them. “While health care cybersecurity is a complex, nuanced challenge with many different contributing factors, the use of legacy technologies, which are typically more insecure than their modern counterparts, continues to be a root cause of many incidents,” the committee’s request for information states. Public comments should be emailed to supportedlifetimes@mail.house.gov by May 31.”
 - Read more: <https://www.aha.org/news/headline/2018-04-20-house-seeks-comments-health-care-cybersecurity-challenges>

Regulatory and Administration Update

- ***Trump to give speech on lowering drug prices this month.*** “President Trump is scheduled to give a speech on prescription drug prices on April 26, the White House said Monday, as he calls for making the drugs more affordable. However, the White House indicated that no new policy proposals will be unveiled at the speech, other than a request for information on ‘various drug pricing ideas,’ according to deputy White House press secretary Hogan Gidley.”
 - Read more: <http://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/383325-trump-to-give-speech-on-lowering-drug-prices-this-month>

- ***US regulators float ideas for boosting medical device safety.*** “U.S. health officials on Tuesday proposed steps to improve the government’s system for overseeing medical devices, which has been criticized for years for failing to catch problems with risky implants and medical instruments. The plan from the Food and Drug Administration includes few immediate changes, but lists a number of ideas and proposals with the goal of improving safeguards on pacemakers, artificial joints, medical scanners and other devices.”
 - Read more: <https://apnews.com/766c3a85f0e24938b8a792606bf589e2/US-regulators-float-ideas-for-boosting-medical-device-safety>

- ***HHS hires former Anthem exec to address health insurance costs.*** “A former member of Anthem’s leadership team has been hired by Health and Human Services to help the federal government transform the health insurance industry. James “Jim” Parker, MBA, who worked more than two decades for Anthem, has been hired to address both the cost and availability of health plans, HHS Secretary Alex Azar said Wednesday in a written announcement naming Parker director of the HHS Office of Health Reform.”
 - Read more: <http://www.healthleadersmedia.com/health-plans/hhs-hires-former-anthem-exec-address-health-insurance-costs>

Articles of Interest

- ***Amazon has shelved a plan to sell drugs to hospitals, and insiders say there are two reasons why.*** “Amazon has shelved plans to sell and distribute pharmaceutical products through Amazon Business, its marketplace for business customers. The biggest challenges include complexities around selling in bulk to large hospitals and building a logistics network to handle pharma delivery. Amazon could still get into the pharma space in another way, as it still has multiple teams working on health care, including Alexa and the secretive Grand Challenge team, sometimes referred to as ‘1492.’”
 - Read more: <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/04/16/amazon-business-not-selling-drugs-but-other-amazon-groups-might.html>

- ***There's a 24-fold rise in organ transplants from drug overdose donors.*** “As the opioid epidemic has skyrocketed in the United States, a rise in the number of drug overdose deaths has contributed to a rise in organ transplants, made possible by overdose-death donors, across the country. A study published in the journal *Annals of Internal Medicine* on Monday now reveals just how much of an increase there has been in the number of overdose-death donors, from being only 1.1% of all donors in 2000 to 13.4% in 2017.”

 - Read more: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/16/health/drug-overdoses-organ-transplants-study/index.html>
- ***AHIP, Blue Cross, SEIU seek action on dialysis 'gaming.'*** “An unlikely ad hoc group of insurers, businesses, unions, and consumer groups want the federal government to crack down on what they say is the inappropriate steering of Medicaid and Medicare-eligible patients with end stage renal disease into higher-paying commercial coverage. The group said dialysis providers are "gaming" a provision in the Affordable Care Act that allows them to provide premium assistance for patients enrolled in Exchange plans through a "financially interested third party – the American Kidney Fund.”

 - Read more: <http://www.healthleadersmedia.com/health-plans/ahip-blue-cross-seiu-seek-action-dialysis-gaming>
- ***Sampling suggests nearly a third of Medicare telehealth payments are improper.*** “CMS paid about \$3.7 million on telehealth claims that did not meet Medicare requirements, according to a new report by HHS Office of Inspector General. The OIG reviewed 191,118 distant-site telehealth claims from 2014 and 2015 totaling \$13.8 million in payments. In a random sample of 100 claims, 31 failed to qualify for Medicare due to geographic and other restrictions.”

 - Read more: <https://www.healthcaredive.com/news/sampling-suggests-nearly-a-third-of-medicare-telehealth-payments-are-improp/521490/>
- ***A 'breakthrough in organ preservation': Study shows keeping livers warm helps preserve them for transplant.*** “For decades, transplant surgeons have treated organs as if they were beers for a camping trip: You just pack them in a cooler and hit the road. But livers, it turns out, aren't much like lagers, and might benefit from a different sort of travel. The alternative that researchers have come up with is a machine designed to mimic the environment of the human body, keeping the organ warm and breathing as it's being shuttled from donor to recipient. Now, after comparing the two, a team has shown that this contraption not only kept livers safer for longer than cold storage, but also allowed surgeons to transplant organs that might otherwise have been thrown out.”

 - Read more: <https://www.statnews.com/2018/04/18/lung-transplant-technology>
- ***Gene therapy helps patients avoid blood transfusion, study says.*** “Among all the patients with severe beta thalassemia who participated in that study, the gene therapy either reduced or eliminated the need for long-term blood transfusions. Results of the

small study, which involved two early clinical trials funded by biotechnology company Bluebird Bio, were published Wednesday in The New England Journal of Medicine. Phase three of the trial is currently underway.”

- Read more: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/18/health/gene-therapy-blood-disorder-beta-thalassemia-study/index.html>
- ***Acute Renal Failure Hospitalizations, 2005-2014.*** “In 2014, hospital stays with a principal diagnosis of acute renal failure accounted for 1.4 percent of all hospitalizations; 10.5 percent of all hospitalizations had an all-listed diagnosis of acute renal failure. Between 2005 and 2014, the rate of stays with a principal diagnosis of acute renal failure increased the most among patients aged 18-44 and 45-64 years, as well as among those living in the lowest income areas. Patients living in the South and Midwest had the highest rate of stays for acute renal failure in 2005 and 2014.”
 - Read more: <https://www.hcup-us.ahrq.gov/reports/statbriefs/sb231-Acute-Renal-Failure-Hospitalizations.jsp>
- ***The risky game one doctor plays to help patients find affordable insulin.*** “CVS Health has just rolled out a program that lets pharmacists show patients the cost of a prescription before they fill it, as well as cheaper options. Massachusetts is, in theory, ahead of many states because doctors, hospitals and insurers are required to help patients find the price of services. But that requirement does not apply to pharmacies or prescriptions, and there's no move to amend the law.”
 - Read more: <http://www.wbur.org/commonhealth/2018/04/19/insulin-drug-pricing-pharmacy>
- ***CVS/Aetna, Cigna/Express Scripts megamergers could lower long-term medical costs.*** “The vaguely outlined collaborative between Amazon, Berkshire Hathaway, and J.P. Chase Morgan poses no short-term threats to established health insurance companies, Moody's says. The proposed acquisition of Aetna by CVS Health and Cigna Corp. acquisition of Express Scripts will be a short-term ding on their credit outlooks but could lower medical costs in the long run, Moody's Investors Service says.”
 - Read more: <http://www.healthleadersmedia.com/health-plans/cvsaetna-cignaexpress-scripts-megamergers-could-lower-long-term-medical-costs>
- ***New Medicare perk for diabetes prevention stumbles at rollout.*** “The April 1 rollout of the Medicare Diabetes Prevention Program, a major new benefit that could help millions of people, is getting off to a rocky start, according to interviews with nearly a dozen experts. In all but a few locations, experts said, Medicare’s new prevention program — a yearlong series of classes about healthy eating, physical activity and behavioral change for people at high risk of developing diabetes — isn’t up and running yet. And there’s no easy way (no phone number or website) to learn where it’s available.”
 - Read more: <https://khn.org/news/new-medicare-perk-for-diabetes-prevention-stumbles-at-rollout/>

- ***Puerto Rico's slow-going recovery means new hardship for dialysis patients.*** "More than six months after the storm, Garcia and 13 other Vieques residents must still board a plane three days a week for kidney dialysis on Puerto Rico's main island. Hurricane Maria totaled Vieques' hospital, which housed the island's only dialysis clinic. That set off an ongoing crisis for patients with kidney failure such as Garcia – who cannot survive without dialysis and for whom the thrice-weekly round trip to a dialysis center in Humacao on Puerto Rico's main island, including treatment, takes at least 12 hours."

 - Read more: <https://khn.org/news/puerto-ricos-slow-going-recovery-means-new-hardship-for-dialysis-patients/>

- ***Germ carried by New York's mice are plentiful, and some have antibiotic-resistance genes.*** "In a new study that looked at New York City mice, researchers discovered that those strains might not be such pleasant houseguests. The mice harbored a number of bacteria that can cause human gastrointestinal infections, including C. difficile, E. coli, and particular Leptospira species, researchers reported Tuesday in the journal mBio. Some of the bacteria also had genes that confer resistance to certain antibiotics. The study did not document any cases of the bacteria passing from the mice to people, and some outside experts are skeptical the supposed threats identified in this and similar studies actually pose a serious danger to humans."

 - Read more: <https://www.statnews.com/2018/04/17/new-york-mouse-bacteria-resistance/>

- ***Immune therapy scored big win against lung cancer in study.*** "For the first time, a treatment that boosts the immune system greatly improved survival in people newly diagnosed with the most common form of lung cancer. It's the biggest win so far for immunotherapy, which has had much of its success until now in less common cancers. In the study, Merck's Keytruda, given with standard chemotherapy, cut in half the risk of dying or having the cancer worsen, compared to chemo alone after nearly one year. The results are expected to quickly set a new standard of care for about 70,000 patients each year in the United States whose lung cancer has already spread by the time it's found."

 - Read more: <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/immune-therapy-scores-big-win-lung-cancer-study-54499990>