

**Budget Cuts Could Reduce Medicare Payments to Providers by \$11 Billion**

According to estimates from the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Medicare providers will see reductions of about \$11 billion beginning in January as part of series of automatic spending cuts set to begin next year unless Congress acts to halt them before then. The numbers came in a report that details how federal agencies would implement roughly \$110 billion in mandatory, across-the-board budget cuts agreed to by Congress and President Obama in August 2011 as a way to end a partisan dispute over raising the debt ceiling. In the case of the cuts to Medicare, seniors would see no changes in their benefits, but providers, including doctors and hospitals, would see an across-the-board 2%. Hospitals would bear the largest share of the cuts.

Lawmakers in both chambers and President Obama want to avoid the automatic cuts called “sequestration” that would trim federal spending by \$2.1 trillion over the next 10 years. "The sequestration itself was never intended to be implemented," OMB said in the report. "The Administration strongly believes that sequestration is bad policy, and that Congress can and should take action to avoid it by passing a comprehensive and balanced deficit reduction package."

Congress could still act to stop the cuts if they think doing so is in their best interests. In order to avoid a government shutdown in the middle of election season, party leaders in both chambers cut a deal to prevent the government from running out of money when the fiscal year ended September 30.

Despite House Speaker John Boehner’s comments to the contrary – he said earlier this week he was “not confident at all” that Congress could cut a deal to avoid the automatic cuts in January – many analysts believe that lawmakers will pass a temporary reprieve because the cuts are disliked so much by both parties.

**766,000 Health Care Jobs May Is Lost Via the Sequester**

On September 12, the American Hospital Association

(AHA), the American Medical Association (AMA), and the American Nurses Association (ANA) released a new report that found up to 766,000 health care and related jobs could be lost by 2021 as a result of the 2% sequester of Medicare spending mandated by the *Budget Control Act of 2011* and scheduled to begin occurring on January 2, 2013.

The report measures the anticipated effect of the cuts in Medicare payments on health care providers and reflects how reductions in Medicare payment for health care services will lead to direct job losses in (Cont'd page 2)

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## NIDA Launches Online Training Modules

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) has launched new online training modules to help doctors combat prescription painkillers abuse by the young. According to experts in the field, the trick is to identify patients who are at risk of abusing prescription drugs without under treating those who have a legitimate medical need for pain relief. However, doctors may shy away from broaching the topic of potential painkiller abuse in talking to their patients because they mistakenly think patients won't answer questions about it.

In a press briefing announcing the modules, White House Office of National Drug Control Policy Direc-

tor Gil Kerlikowske said doctors and other health care professionals "are an important line of defense against prescription drug abuse in America." But "too often, I hear from the medical community that there are very few hours in medical school devoted to safe and effective pain management. Unfortunately, this lack of training can lead to improper prescribing of powerful painkillers and a lack of understanding about the disease of addiction and how it can be prevented and treated."

The educational materials walk the provider through a series of questions, addressing any gaps in their knowledge based on their answers. They also coach doctors

on what questions are effective in drawing useful information out of patients. For example, the materials agree that "a personal or family history of drug abuse, a history of mood disorders and a history of current or prior cigarette smoking are all risk factors for prescription opioid abuse." On the other hand, the course work points out that "there is no evidence of a causal relationship between traumatic brain injury and onset of opioid abuse."

The initiative is part of a broader effort by the drug control policy office and other agencies to reduce painkiller abuse. Kerlikowske noted that there is some evidence that

those efforts may be having at least some impact – there was a 12% drop in the number of Americans abusing prescription drugs in 2011 compared with 2010. But there is still "an epidemic," he said. "In 2009, over 20,000 people died from prescription drug overdoses and opioids analgesics were involved in over 15,000 of those deaths. This is nearly four times the number of people who died from opioid analgesics a decade earlier. In fact, overdose deaths involving opioid analgesics now outnumber deaths from heroin and cocaine combined."

The NIDA screening tool can be found at <http://www.drugabuse.gov/nmassist/>

The online courses "provide practical guidance for clinicians in screening their pain patients for risk factors before prescribing. They also help medical professionals identify when patients are abusing their medications, using videos that model effective communication about sensitive issues.

– Nora Volkow, Director, National Institutes of Health

## Shorts . . .

### More Physicians Running for Congress

As many as 30 physicians could be in Congress after the November election. Twenty-eight physicians have their names on the ballot including 17 incumbents and 11 challengers.

Of the 20 incumbents, 17 are in the House and three are in the Senate. All of those in the House, except for Representative Ron Paul (R-TX), who made an unsuccessful bid for the presidency, are running for reelection. Two senators – Rand Paul (R-KY) and Tom Coburn (R-OK) – are not up for reelection.

Twenty-six of the 28 candidates are running for House seats. The only two Senate physician candidates are Senator John Barrasso (R-WY), running for reelection, and Richard Carmona (D-AZ), who is hoping to fill the seat of retiring Senator Jon Kyl (R-AZ).

Of the 20 current physician members of Congress, a nonvoting delegate, Donna Christensen (D-VI) and Representative Jim McDermott (D-WA) are the only

two Democrats. But of the 11 challengers this fall, seven are Democrats.

### **Lame Duck Congress Returns in November**

Both the House and Senate will return to Washington, D.C. the week of November 12. With many pressing issues to tackle after the election, it is currently unclear how long the lame duck Congress will be in session.

## **766,000 Health Care Jobs May Be Lost Via the Sequester (Cont'd from page 1)**

losses in the health care sector and reduced purchases by health care entities of goods and services from other businesses. As the impact of these cuts ripples through the economy, jobs will be lost across many sectors beyond health care.

The report estimates that, during the first year of the sequester, more than 496,000 jobs will be lost. It also found that the job losses will affect many economic sectors beyond health care, and will be spread across every state with more than 78,000 jobs lost in California alone by 2021.

The health care sector has long been an economic mainstay, providing stability and growth even during times of recession. The Bureau of Labor Statistics' data shows that health care created 169,800 jobs in the first half of 2012 and accounted for one out of every five new jobs created this year.

Last year's budget deal requires \$1.2 trillion over a decade in automatic across-the-board cuts for some federal programs to take effect unless Congress finds an alternative. Most policy analysts expect lawmakers to get more serious about funding and tax decisions after the November elections.

## **Candidate Information Available on Legislative Action Center**

**B**efore going to the voting booth on November 6, make sure you know each candidate's position. AAEM's Legislative Action Center contains a comprehensive resource specifically designed to meet all your election 2012 needs whether they are federal, state or local. From detailed candidate bios to voter registration services, from information about specific ballot initiatives to help in locating polling sites, all this can be found under the "Elections & Candidates" tab on the homepage of the Legislative Action Center at <http://capwiz.com/aaem/home/>.

In addition, for any of your federal legislators, look up their voting record on the issues of concerns to AAEM and the emergency medicine community. Go to your representative's or senators' homepage on AAEM's Legislative Action Center and click on the tabs "Votes" and "Bills" to see how they align with AAEM positions.