

American Nephrology Nurses Association

Daily Capitol Hill Update – Friday, December 18, 2020

The following information comes from directly from news sources including Bloomberg Government, Kaiser Health News, and other news sources.

Schedules: White House and Congress

WHITE HOUSE

- 8am: VP Pence, second lady Karen Pence receive Covid-19 vaccine
- 3:30pm: President Trump, Pence meet with acting Defense secretary Christopher Miller
- 4pm: Pence hosts Space Force's 1st Birthday Celebration

CONGRESS

- Senate meets at 10am and resumes consideration of judicial nominees
- House meets at noon for legislative business, first votes expected between 1pm and 2pm

Congressional, Health Policy, and Political News

- **Bloomberg: Lawmakers Are Facing Down Deadline on Aid Plan:** The federal government faces the possibility of a partial weekend shutdown because of disputes over some of the details in a pandemic relief plan, Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) said. Congress still doesn't have legislation for the relief plan, which leaders plan to attach to a \$1.4 trillion bill that would fund the federal government through the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30. The government is currently operating on stopgap funding that expires today. If the House and Senate need more time to process the legislation, another short-term funding bill would be needed. But Thune, who is the chief GOP vote-counter in the Senate, said some lawmakers, who he didn't name, may object in order to push their own priorities in the bill. That would leave the government without funding, though the White House budget office has legal discretion to avoid the start of federal worker furloughs if funding is likely to pass in the near future.
- **NPR: FDA Expert Panel Endorses Moderna's COVID-19 Vaccine For Emergency Use:** In a 20-0 vote, with one abstention, a panel of advisers to the Food and Drug Administration recommended that the COVID-19 vaccine being developed by Moderna be authorized for emergency use in adults during the pandemic. If the agency authorizes the vaccine for emergency use, as is expected, it would become the second to be deployed in the U.S. to fight the coronavirus. The vote in favor of the vaccine was taken to answer the agency's question: Do the benefits of the Moderna vaccine outweigh its risks for use in people age 18 and older? The vaccine is 94% effective in preventing COVID-19, and the agency's analysis said there are no specific safety concerns that would stand in the way of authorization.
- **Bloomberg: Azar to Stay on Job After Wife Tests Positive:** Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar's wife, Jennifer, has tested positive for the coronavirus, but he will continue going to work and spoke maskless at a pair of events a day before her case

was confirmed. Azar is likely to be vaccinated next week, a person familiar with the matter said.

- **Stat: In Rare Appearance, Two In Sackler Family Deny Responsibility For Opioid Crisis:** In a first-of-its-kind appearance on Capitol Hill, two members of the Sackler family that controls Purdue Pharma apologized for the suffering caused by the opioid crisis but otherwise denied wrongdoing and failed to accept personal responsibility for their company's role in it. Mostly, the session before the House Committee on Government Oversight and Reform gave lawmakers the chance to angrily chastise Kathe Sackler and David Sackler, who were threatened with subpoenas after they first declined to testify.
- **Stat: Biogen To Pay \$22 Million For Illegally Using Charities To Pay Kickbacks To Medicare Patients:** Biogen (BIIB) has agreed to pay \$22 million to resolve allegations that donations it paid to charities were actually kickbacks to Medicare patients used to cover out-of-pockets costs for its multiple sclerosis medicines. This is only the latest instance in which federal authorities have cracked down on such arrangements between drug makers and patient assistance charities.
- **NPR: Pulse Oximeters Can Give False Readings in COVID-19 Patients with Dark Skin:** The common fingertip devices that measures oxygen in the blood can sometimes give misleading readings in people with dark skin, according to a report Wednesday in The New England Journal of Medicine. These devices, called pulse oximeters, are increasingly finding their way into people's homes, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. So, this is not just a concern for medical personnel using professional-grade devices.
- **Bloomberg: FDA, Pfizer Revising Vaccine Side Effect Guidelines:** At the panel meeting yesterday, some of its discussion focused on a handful of allergic reactions experienced by people in the U.S. and U.K. who took Pfizer's shot. Side effects seen in the rollout of the Pfizer-BioNTech shot are now leading federal regulators to revise instructions for doctors and those that take the shot. Pfizer and the FDA are revising fact sheets distributed with the doses, according to Doran Fink, deputy chief of FDA's division on vaccines, at the advisory panel's meeting.
- **Bloomberg: Care Coordination Pushed for Dual Medicare-Medicaid Enrollees:** Medicaid managed care organizations will receive financial incentives for reducing enrollees' expenses under an initiative announced Thursday by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. The initiative is aimed at helping people enrolled in both Medicare and Medicaid navigate the two programs and receive improved care coordination – and at reducing program expenditures, according to a CMS statement. More than 12 million people were enrolled in both programs in 2019, the statement said. These “dual eligibles” are an “especially high needs population,” with 70% having three or more chronic conditions, and more than 40% having at least one mental health diagnosis, the CMS said. Those beneficiaries account for around 20% of Medicare enrollees, but more than one-third of Medicare expenses, the agency said. The initiative brings Medicaid MCOs into the CMS's direct-contracting program. The goal of that program is to test financial risk-sharing arrangements to reduce Medicare expenditures and improve health outcomes.