

American Nephrology Nurses Association

Daily Capitol Hill Update - Thursday, April 29, 2021

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

- President Biden travels to Georgia today, where he will meet with former President Jimmy Carter and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter. He will then attend at drive-in car rally at the Infinite Energy Center in Duluth, Ga.

CONGRESS

- Senators plan to vote this afternoon on a bipartisan water infrastructure bill that would authorize \$35 billion for drinking water and wastewater infrastructure projects.

Congressional, Health Policy, and Political News

- **Bloomberg Government: Panel Pushes Eased Telehealth Rules:** Key senators yesterday voiced support for continuing the loosened telehealth restrictions for Medicare enacted in response to the spread of Covid-19. Sens. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) and Richard Burr (R-N.C.), the heads of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, both said that expanding access to telehealth services helped U.S. health-care providers respond to the increase in mental health emergencies in 2020. "Telehealth has been a key to treatment during Covid and it must not be rolled back post-Covid," Burr said.
 - The pair join key House lawmakers, such as Rep. Anna Eshoo (D-Calif.), head of the Energy and Commerce Committee's health panel, in trying to extend the temporary changes made during the pandemic.
 - In 2020, the government temporarily authorized Medicare to pay for telehealth outside rural areas and add more than 100 new telehealth-eligible services. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services also allowed some health visits by phone, waiving requirements for audio-visual technologies, and increased what it pays to doctors for some telehealth visits to make them comparable to an in-person trip. As a result, Medicare beneficiaries used telehealth for 44% of their primary care visits in April, compared to under 1% in February 2020, HHS found.
- **Bloomberg Government: HHS Updates Wage Comparisons for Reclassified Rural Hospitals:** The Department of Health and Human Services Wednesday unveiled a Medicare interim final rule that changes how hospitals can reclassify themselves to receive higher government payments. Medicare pays hospitals varying rates for inpatient treatment based on their geographic areas. The law provides an avenue for hospitals to adjust how they're classified based on the average hourly wage they pay to their employees. The classification is a critical part of Medicare reimbursement, and can make the difference of hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. The rule (RIN 0938-AU56), effective May 10, adjusts the wage comparison for hospitals that have been reclassified as

rural such that they can receive an additional boost if they pay their workers more. To qualify, they must pay their workers 106% of the three-year average hourly wage of all other hospitals in the rural area of their state. Previously, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services compared applying hospitals' wages to the three-year average in the urban area in which they're located, effectively making it more difficult to qualify for extra money.

- **Bloomberg Government: White House Completes Review of Medicare Joint Replacement Rule:** The White House has completed its review of a final rule adding three years to an experimental Medicare payment system for joint replacements, signaling the regulation could be published at any time. The rule (RIN 0938-AU01) is expected to update the definition of an "episode of care" to include outpatient knee and hip replacement and make adjustments to the target price calculation, the reconciliation process, beneficiary notice requirements, and the appeals process. It projects to save Medicare roughly \$269 million over the three additional model years, according to estimates in the proposed rule by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. The proposed rule was unveiled in February 2020 by the Trump administration.
- **Stat: Biden Pitches A New Health Agency To Help 'End Cancer As We Know It':** In one of the most emotional moments of his first major address to Congress, President Biden on Wednesday called on lawmakers to help him "end cancer as we know it." The bold pledge came after Biden gave a high-profile endorsement of his administration's proposal to create a new biomedical research agency aimed at developing "breakthrough" treatments for conditions including cancer, Alzheimer's disease, and diabetes.
- **CNBC: CDC Finds Pfizer, Moderna Covid Vaccines 94% Effective At Preventing Elderly Hospitalizations:** The Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna Covid-19 vaccines are 94% effective at preventing hospitalizations among fully vaccinated adults ages 65 and older, according to a real-world study published Wednesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The two-dose mRNA vaccines were also found in the study to be 64% effective at preventing hospitalizations in the elderly who received just one shot. The study evaluated 417 hospitalized adults across 14 states from January to March. The U.S. agency said the findings were consistent with those found in clinical trials.
- **Stat: The FDA May Fine Its First Drug Maker For Failing To Post Clinical Trial Results:** The Food and Drug Administration is threatening to fine Acceleron Pharma (XLRN) for failing to submit required information about a clinical trial to a federal registry, the first time the agency has taken such a step in response to ongoing calls for greater transparency into clinical studies. In an April 27 letter sent to the drug maker, the FDA noted the results of a Phase 2 clinical trial that was run to test a pair of drugs for treating advanced kidney cancer had not been posted, even though the agency contacted the company last July about the issue. Acceleron now has until May 27 to post the data and an Acceleron spokesman wrote us that the company plans to do so.