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August 6th, 2024

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Hospice Provider News

'Sharpen your game:' Dombi tells hospices to step up in face of stricter government oversight

McKnight's Home Care; by Adam Healy; 7/22/24

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services has hospice on its radar, and providers' best safeguard against unwanted attention is to take oversight measures into their own hands, according to William Dombi, president of the National Association for Home Care & Hospice. "Sharpen your game before somebody knocks on your door," Dombi said Monday during a press conference at the 2024 NAHC Financial Management Conference in Las Vegas. He recommended that hospice providers look internally to identify problems that could raise regulators' alarms. An independent audit, he noted, could be helpful

for spotting potential noncompliance... He later noted, "Hospices believe they're compliant when they're probably not."

Merger will take advocacy efforts to new heights, NAHC, NHPCO leaders say

McKnight's Home Care; by Adam Healy; 8/1/24

The merging of two major trade associations is a key step forward for home care and hospice advocacy efforts, according to leaders of the National Association for Home Care & Hospice and the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization... The [NAHC-NHPCO] Alliance also provided an update on its CEO search. The organizations have previously stated that neither Dombi nor Ben Marcantonio, CEO of NHPCO, will be eligible to lead the merged organization. Instead, CEO candidates have come from a variety of backgrounds, including healthcare policy and advocacy, consulting and lobbying, government agencies and regulated entities, according to Melinda Gruber, vice chair of the Alliance's transition board of directors. "We've had a large number of candidates and interest," Gruber said Wednesday. "We are nearing the finalist selection phase ... and we cannot wait to make an announcement after that." Finally, NAHC and NHPCO disclosed that "The NAHC-NHPCO Alliance," the associations' current moniker, will likely not be the name it uses as a fully merged organization. "Trademark hurdles" have delayed the announcement of its official new name, but it is anticipated to be revealed soon, according to Ken Albert, chair of the transition board.

Major acquisition fuels earnings success for VITAS in Q2

McKnight's Home Care; by Adam Healy; 7/25/24

VITAS Healthcare Corporation, the hospice subsidiary of Chemed Corporation, produced impressive second quarter earnings driven by workforce investments and a big-ticket acquisition [Covenant Health] that closed in April. In the quarter ended June 30, VITAS' net income skyrocketed by 88.5% year-over-year to \$49.2 million, according to an earnings report. Its revenues improved 16.7% to \$374.5 million as patient admissions and average daily census increased by 11% and 14.4%, respectively, compared to the prior year quarter.

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Clinical News

Preventing the prescribing cascade: Lessons from hospice and palliative care

McKnight's Home Care; by Caren McHenry Martin; 7/24/24

More than 2 in 5 seniors experience polypharmacy, meaning they are prescribed five or more drugs. Polypharmacy is a persistent issue in elder care, particularly for patients with chronic or advanced disease. The medication burden increases as patients near the end of life, with an average of more than 10 drugs per patient. As a pharmacist serving the hospice community, I often find myself asking a simple question: Is this medication treating a symptom or a side effect?

The Last 30 Days: How Oncologists' Choices Affect End-of-Life Cancer Care

Medscape; by Katie Lennon; 8/2/24

Oncologists show significant variability in prescribing systemic cancer therapies in the last 30 days of life. Patients treated by oncologists in the top quartile for end-of-life prescribing behavior were almost four and a half times more likely to receive end-of-life therapy than those treated by these specialists in the bottom quartile... "Given calls to rein in overutilization of end-of-life six to eight cancer therapies, our findings highlight an underappreciated area for further research: How treatment discontinuation before death is shaped by oncologists' unique treatment propensities. Elucidating the reasons for this remarkable variability in oncologist treatment behavior could inform efforts to reduce end-of-life cancer treatment overutilization," wrote the authors of the study. [Free subscription may be required.]

Nonprofit pledges \$4M to expand respite programs for caregivers

McKnight's Home Care; by Adam Healy; 7/26/24

The Alzheimer's Association has pledged more than \$4 million in grants that will help community-based organizations enhance respite care programs for caregivers serving people with dementia. "There is an urgent need across the country for dementia-specific respite care programs for people living with dementia and their caregivers," said Sam Fazio, PhD, the senior director of psychological research and quality care at the nonprofit Alzheimer's Association, in a statement. "These initial grants will help expand dementia-specific respite care programs and create new ones to support dementia caregivers while ensuring the person living with dementia gets high-quality dementia care in a safe environment." The grants are part of a five-year program that will direct a total of \$25 million to community-based respite service providers.



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Dr. Susan Bray-Hall brings leadership, proven experience to the VA Rocky Mountain Network

Utah Business; 7/5/24

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced today the appointment of Susan Bray-Hall, M.D., FACP, as Chief Medical Officer (CMO), VA Rocky Mountain Network (Veterans Integrated Service Network [VISN] 19). She is responsible for overseeing all clinical programs, operations, and services in VISN 19, a system with 18,000 employees that serves nearly 750,000 eligible Veterans at eight health care systems, and more than 100 additional sites of care.

Publisher's note: Congratulations Susan!

Regulatory News

Home health sees spending, utilization decline as hospice equivalents grow, MedPAC reports

McKnight's Home Care; by Adam Healy; 7/19/24

Though hospice spending and utilization appear to be on the rise, Medicare spending on home health has fallen amid declining utilization in recent years, according to a new [report](#) by the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission. In 2022, the year of the most recent available data, Medicare home health spending shrank to \$16.4 billion. That compares to \$17 billion the year prior, the report found. Meanwhile, the number of home health users declined by 6.3% from 2021, and the overall share of Medicare beneficiaries that use home health shrank by 3% from the year prior. The total number of in-person home health visits decreased by 9.6% year-over-year in 2022... Meanwhile, the hospice industry has experienced both reimbursement and utilization gains in recent years, MedPAC reported. Medicare hospice payments rose 2.7% year-over-year in 2022, while the number of beneficiaries using hospice services ticked up by 0.4%. These patients are also receiving more care; the total number of hospice days provided to beneficiaries increased by 2% in 2022.

Healthcare providers wary CMS dementia pilot will not cover costs

Modern Healthcare; by Diane Eastabrook; 7/23/24

Hospitals, primary care practices and other healthcare providers are split over whether Medicare will pay them enough to cover dementia patients at home as part of a new pilot. Nearly 100 providers began enrolling patients July 1 in the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services' Guiding an Improved Dementia Experience model, known as GUIDE. Another 300 others will begin enrolling patients in the program on July 1, 2025. Some participants that previously provided comprehensive wrap-around services for dementia patients at home said getting a monthly care management payment for each fee-for-service beneficiary will cover costs they had been absorbing. But others aren't sure the reimbursement will be enough to scale up programs or cover the cost of care for these complex patients.



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Public Policy News

Top PBM executives grilled in contentious congressional hearing

Modern Healthcare; by Michael McAuliff; 7/23/24

Lawmakers and executives from three major pharmacy benefit managers presented diametrically opposing views at a heated Capitol Hill hearing Tuesday, as major bills aimed at reining in the organizations remain stalled in Congress. Members of the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability blamed the highly concentrated PBM industry for raising drug prices and running independent pharmacies out of business, while leaders from CVS Caremark, Express Scripts and Optum Rx all countered that the sector in fact lowers prices and supports local pharmacies.

Post-Acute Care News

Owner of home health care company convicted of multimillion dollar health care fraud scheme

DOJ press release; 7/22/24

[Boston] Faith Newton, 56, was convicted of one count of conspiracy to commit health care fraud, one count of health care fraud, and three counts of money laundering. The jury found the defendant not guilty on one count of money laundering conspiracy... "Newton orchestrated a massive \$100 million health care fraud scheme that targeted the Medicaid program, funding her lavish lifestyle at the expense of the American taxpayers," said Roberto Coviello, Special Agent in Charge of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General (HHS-OIG). "Today's guilty verdict underscores the commitment of HHS-OIG and our partners to protecting the integrity of our federal health care system, and it should also serve as a stern warning to criminals who contemplate engaging in similar illegal schemes."

No prison for nursing home owner who botched Hurricane Ida evacuation, leading to 7 resident deaths

McKnight's Long-Term Care News; by Josh Henreckson; 7/23/24

Bob Dean has been sentenced to three years of probation and must pay more than \$1.3 million in restitution and penalties for his role in the disastrous emergency evacuation of nearly 850 residents from his seven Louisiana nursing homes during Hurricane Ida. The 2021 emergency evacuation to a warehouse Dean owned near New Orleans left the residents of his nursing homes in a state of overcrowding and neglect. Seven died within days of the storm — with hundreds more rescued by state officials. Dean pleaded no contest to 15 state criminal charges, including multiple counts each of cruelty to the infirmed, obstruction of justice and Medicaid fraud.



Steward Health Care to close more Massachusetts hospitals

Modern Healthcare; by Alex Kacik; 7/26/24

Steward Health Care plans to shut down two Massachusetts hospitals next month, bringing the total number of closures in the Commonwealth this year to three. Steward, a national 31-hospital system that owns eight hospitals in Massachusetts, has been soliciting bids for its entire network and physician group in bankruptcy. The Dallas-based system filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in May, leading to a Justice Department and congressional investigation into its restructuring plans.

*Publisher's note: Also see related article: **Steward Health finds buyers for 2 hospitals amid Senate probe**; 7/22/24; Bankrupt Steward Health said it found buyers for two of its hospitals in Arkansas and Louisiana, as the nation's largest for-profit health system braces for a bipartisan Senate investigation into its financial woes.*

Technology / Innovations News

End-of-life decisions are difficult and distressing. Could AI help?

MIT Technology Review; by Jessica Hamzelouarchive; 8/1/24

Ethicists say a “digital psychological twin” could help doctors and family members make decisions for people who can’t speak themselves. End-of-life decisions can be extremely upsetting for surrogates, the people who have to make those calls on behalf of another person, says David Wendler, a bioethicist at the US National Institutes of Health. Wendler and his colleagues have been working on an idea for something that could make things easier: an artificial-intelligence-based tool that can help surrogates predict what patients themselves would want in any given situation. The tool hasn’t been built yet. But Wendler plans to train it on a person’s own medical data, personal messages, and social media posts. He hopes it could not only be more accurate at working out what the patient would want, but also alleviate the stress and emotional burden of difficult decision-making for family members.

General News

[Oak Ridge Boys speak out about longtime member Joe Bonsall's death. See what they said](#)

Nashville Tennessean; by Audrey Gibbs; 7/11/24

Earlier this week, Oak Ridge Boys member and tenor vocalist Joe Bonsall died at 76 years old due to complications of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis... We would also like to thank the amazing people with Alive Hospice and encourage donations...



Today's Encouragement

[Winning doesn't always mean being first. Winning means you're doing better than you've ever done before. ~Bonnie Blair, American speed skater and five-time gold medalist](#)



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