

Three Minute Read™

Insights from the Healing American Healthcare Coalition™

Will the Trump Administration cover weight loss drugs for Medicare and Medicaid? Read on!

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From the Editor: While United Healthcare's business practices are often appalling, placing profits above patient care, violence against its executive leadership is not a solution. It's an uphill battle given the industry's hundreds of DC lobbyists, but grass-roots advocacy efforts are the route to take. Be sure that your elected representatives know your position on important healthcare issues. This issue focuses on weight loss drugs and the need for more primary care physicians. Click the headline for the full article. If you like **TMR**, click [here](#) to subscribe.



[Biden proposes weight loss drug coverage for people on Medicare and Medicaid](#), by Berkeley Lovelace Jr. and Evan Bush, NBC News, 11/26/24

TMR Topline – Given that the medical community considers obesity a “*chronic disease*,” the Biden administration plans to require Medicare and Medicaid to offer coverage of weight loss medications for people seeking obesity treatment. The change would dramatically reduce out-of-pocket costs for the drugs, including Novo Nordisk’s Ozempic and Wegovy, and Eli Lilly’s Mounjaro and Zepbound. There is a 60-day public comment period before it can go into effect, leaving it up to the Trump administration whether to finalize it.

More than [40% of Americans are considered obese](#), and the 10-year cost will be about \$25 billion for Medicare and \$11 billion for Medicaid. Trump’s HHS nominee RFK Jr. hasn’t been so keen on this class of drugs while CMS nominee Dr. Oz has praised them. Obesity puts people [at risk for heart disease, diabetes, breathing problems, stroke and some cancers](#). The drugs mimic the GLP-1 hormone which helps control blood sugar, manage people’s metabolism and help them feel full.



[Lilly's Zepbound tops Wegovy for weight loss in head-to-head trial](#),

by Patrick Wingrove, Reuters, 12/4/24

TMR Topline – In the first large, head-to-head trial of the rival drugs, Eli Lilly’s Zepbound helped patients lose an average of 20.2% of their weight after 72 weeks compared to 13.7% for the group treated with Novo Nordisk’s Wegovy. The 752 participants were either obese or overweight and had an additional related health issue such as obstructive sleep apnea or heart disease. None of the trial subjects had diabetes. Lilly’s drug mimics two gut hormones while Wegovy has a single mode of action. Novo Nordisk is developing CagriSema with a dual mode of action to regain an edge on efficacy over Lilly, noting that Wegovy is the only obesity drug shown to reduce the risk of heart attack or stroke. Both drugs are sold in the US under different brand names - Novo’s Ozempic and Lilly’s Mounjaro - to treat type 2 diabetes.



[CMS releases 200 new Medicare residency slots](#), by

Bridget Early, Modern Healthcare, 11/22/24

TMR Topline – CMS has released 200 new [graduate medical education residency slots](#), 70% of which are set aside for students looking to pursue careers in primary care and psychiatry. It’s the first increase in GME funding since 1997. The Association of American Medical Colleges projects that the US will face a shortage of up to 86,000 physicians by 2036. Medicare is the largest single funding source for physician residency programs, paying \$16.2 billion for slots in 2020.

To qualify for a slot, a hospital must either be: in a rural area; training a number of residents that exceeds their current GME slots; in a state with new medical schools or branch campuses; or in a Health Professional Shortage area. Medical students [filled a record number of residency positions](#) this year. In 2021, [the GAO](#) found that some teaching hospitals that don’t receive federal funding choose to offset the expense of training new physician residents themselves



One other good idea from RFK Jr.: Boost primary care, by Merrill Goozner, GoozNews, 12/11/24

TMR Topline – In addition to his focus on the health harms caused by processed foods and environmental toxins, RFK Jr. wants to change how Medicare compensates physicians by correcting the imbalance between primary care and specialist earnings. Unlike other high-income countries, the current system shortchanges the primary care docs who promote prevention and wellness, manage patients with multiple chronic conditions, and daily see people with symptoms of unknown origin. A little-known committee of the AMA, dominated by specialists, recommends what CMS should pay for the nearly 10,000 procedural codes physicians use to charge for services. As a result, only 5% of payments go to preventing sickness, diagnosing diseases early, and helping the chronically ill to avoid more serious illness. The AMA justifies higher pay for specialists by claiming it takes more time, practice, and know-how to perform or manage complex procedures and cases. Specialists also undergo training programs that last anywhere from one to three years longer than primary care physicians. The AMA insists it has taken steps to reduce the disparity in recent years, but the spread between top specialist pay and primary care physician pay has grown wider (see chart).

Specialty	Avg. Salary 2024	\$ Increase 2010-24
Orthopedic	\$ 699,267	\$ 213,084
Cardiology (invasive)	\$ 670,848	\$ 220,548
Plastic surgery	\$ 632,505	\$ 257,651
Gastroenterology	\$ 602,404	\$ 197,433
Radiation oncology	\$ 590,958	\$ 184,344
Urology	\$ 585,296	\$ 193,833
Radiology	\$ 563,553	\$ 131,180
Dermatology	\$ 547,396	\$ 177,649
Cardiology (non-invasive)	\$ 544,368	\$ 154,008
Oncology (including hematology)	\$ 516,505	\$ 166,404
Anesthesiology	\$ 502,133	\$ 138,430
Obstetrics/gynecology	\$ 389,523	\$ 109,216
Neurology	\$ 367,338	\$ 115,263
Psychiatry	\$ 323,633	\$ 116,571
Internal medicine	\$ 313,417	\$ 107,086
Family practitioner	\$ 301,007	\$ 113,130
Pediatrics	\$ 278,490	\$ 86,716

Source: Modern Healthcare's annual physician compensation surveys

CMS's latest update of the physician pay scale included new payment codes for primary care physicians. "These efforts move us in the right direction, but we have a long way to go," said [Ann Greiner](#), president of the Primary Care Collaborative. The Urban Institute's Robert Berenson wants legislation to establish an independent technical advisory panel that isn't dependent on professional societies to determine how much their time

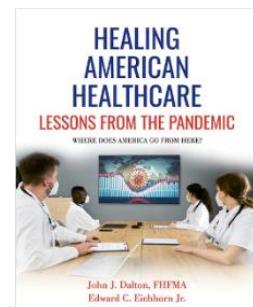
and expertise are worth—a blatant conflict of interest in the AMA's current setup.

TMR's Take: On average, specialists salaries increased by \$185K (46%) from 2010-24 while PCPs salaries increased by \$108K (49%), so the disparity is not narrowing. PCPs in other high-income countries serve as gatekeepers to the consultants (specialists) and are better paid for their management of patients.



House Covid-19 panel releases final report criticizing public health response to the pandemic, by Katherine Dillinger, CNN, 12/2/24

TMR Topline – The House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic released its final [report](#), concluding that the coronavirus "most likely emerged from a laboratory in Wuhan, China," citing factors like biological characteristics of the virus and illnesses among researchers at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. A US intelligence analysis [released last year](#) said either a laboratory or natural origin was possible, and the community remains [split on the issue](#). Chaired by Rep. Brad Wenstrup (R-OH), a podiatrist, the panel's hearings were often partisan. The report criticized common Covid mitigation measures, contending that social distancing and mask mandates were not based on hard science, but applauded the travel restrictions instituted by the Trump administration early in the pandemic, and Operation Warp Speed, the effort to quickly develop a Covid-19 vaccine, which the report calls "an incredible feat of science" that saved millions of lives. It also says that health officials and the Biden administration oversold the power of the vaccines to prevent transmission or infection, possibly contributing to the public's lack of trust in Covid shots and in vaccines overall. It accuses public health officials of taking part in a "coordinated effort ... to ignore natural immunity and suppress dissenting opinions."



TMR's Take: The House report is a mixed bag with a partisan bent. "Healing American Healthcare: Lessons from the Pandemic" provides a more balanced view of the Covid-19 pandemic and lessons learned. Click [here](#) to buy it at a discounted price with coupon Printbook or ebook at checkout. It's available in both soft-cover and eBook versions.