



CMA Weekly Alert – March 2, 2006

SENIORS NOT HAPPY WITH PRIVATE DRUG PLANS: IT'S TIME FOR A REAL MEDICARE DRUG BENEFIT

Seniors continue to have an unfavorable impression of the new Medicare Part D benefit, and many do not plan to enroll, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation's latest poll (Kaiser Family Foundation, *Health Poll Report Survey*, available at <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/pomr021706pkg.cfm>, February 2006). The survey reports that more than half of seniors have already decided not to enroll or are not sure if they will enroll. Of the 29% who say they will not enroll, 68% said it is because they already have insurance or other help paying for their drugs, while 51% say they do not think they will save any money through the private drug plans. The poll of 262 adults over the age of 65, conducted February 2-7, had a margin of plus or minus 7%.

Understanding Part D

Despite heavy efforts from the federal government to educate and inform seniors about Medicare Part D, the majority of seniors still have an unfavorable impression of the program (45%), up from 34% last April. Understanding the program's complexities does not drastically change seniors' impressions: of those who say they have enough information to understand how the benefit will affect them, the majority (43%) still say they have an unfavorable impression of the program. The percentage is slightly higher for those who do not feel they have enough information (47%). A full 61% of seniors say they understand Part D "Not well at all" or "Not too well."

1-800-MEDICARE and Medicare.gov

When asked about familiarity with 1-800-MEDICARE, the primary contact offered by Medicare for beneficiaries, 67% of seniors say they have heard of it, but only 14% say they have ever called the number. Almost one-third of all seniors say they have never heard of 1-800-MEDICARE. The poll also reflects the already well-documented lack of internet use among seniors. While 51% of seniors have heard of Medicare.gov, 72% of seniors have never been online. Of those who have been online, only 10% have visited Medicare.gov: 6% to compare plans, 4% to look for general information. Despite the fact that very few actually use the internet, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services continues to push the internet as a resource for seniors. The poll does show, however, that use of both has increased since August 2005; 1-800-MEDICARE up from 7 to 14%, and Medicare.gov up from 3 to 10% for the respective resources.

Where do Seniors Turn for Information?

Because so few seniors are using official Medicare resources to get information, the poll also asked where seniors are really turning for information about Part D. The majority look to their pharmacist (27%) and/or doctor (26%) to learn more about the program, while 17% have talked to an insurance agent, and another 17% to a health insurance counselor. While trust in doctors and pharmacists remains high (over 60% say they trust their doctor and/or pharmacist to help them understand and choose among private Part D plans), trust in health insurance counselors is low, at 16%. Trust in Medicare to help choose a Part D plan also remains low, at only 30%.

Too Many Choices

One of the many problems affecting Medicare beneficiaries is the overwhelming number of plans offered. When asked how they feel about the number of choices available, a surprisingly low 38% said they feel there are too many choices. When asked to estimate the number of plans available to them however, almost half (49%) said they didn't know or refused to answer the question, while 32% guessed that they had fewer than 20 choices. Seniors were then told that they had over 40 choices in most cases, and were asked if they thought this amount of choice was helpful. A full two-thirds responded that having such a large number of choices makes it confusing and difficult to pick the best plan.

The Center for Medicare Advocacy continues to advocate for a uniform Medicare prescription drug benefit offered through traditional Medicare, not through private plans. This poll confirms that beneficiaries feel the program is confusing and will not significantly help with the high cost of prescription drugs.

For more information, contact attorney Judith Stein (jstein@medicareadvocacy.org) In the Center for Medicare Advocacy's Connecticut office at (860) 456-7790, or attorney Vicki Gottlich (vgottlich@medicareadvocacy.org) in the Center for Medicare Advocacy's Washington, DC office at (202) 216-0028.