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## HealthNet News

March/April 2018

*Linking Connecticut Patients and Families to Reliable Health Information*

**In this issue:**

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### **Free-Standing Surgery Center - Dangerous "Conveyor Belt of Care"**

The first free-standing surgery center opened almost 50 years ago as a lower-cost alternative to traditional hospitals for minor procedures. Surgery centers are not required to have the same level of staffing or lifesaving equipment as full-service hospitals. Today there are over 5,600 such centers. An investigation by *Kaiser Health News* and *USA Today* uncovered 260 patient deaths since 2013 following short-stay procedures at surgery centers. The investigation found surgery centers are expanding their business by taking on increasingly

risky surgeries; centers are accepting patients with high-risk health problems; some centers skimp on safety training and life-saving equipment; and in rural areas the nearest full-service hospital may be more than 20 minutes away by ambulance.

### **App Enables Persons with Dementia to Share Their Memories**

The "My House of Memories" app enables persons with dementia and their caregivers to explore objects from the past and share memories those objects spark. The app has pictures of objects from the 1930's to the 1980's grouped by broad categories like school, work, and leisure. The pictures are enlivened by sound, music, and descriptions. Caregivers can also upload their own photos of objects that might resonate with their charge or family member. "My House of Memories" was created by National Museums Liverpool. The Museums offer training, resources, and museum-based activities that support person-centered dementia care. In the U.S., the [Minnesota Historical Society](#) is developing a memory app tailored to American elders.

### **Paying Cash for Your Prescriptions May Save You Money**

Your prescription may cost less if you pay in cash than if use your insurance copay. Why? Clawbacks are the reason. When the total cost of a drug is less than the patient's copayment, the insurer or the pharmacy benefits manager (PBM) keeps the difference in what is called a "clawback." Some pharmacists are unable to tell patients they could save money by paying for their prescriptions in cash because of [gag clauses](#) in their contracts with PBMs. According to a [study](#) conducted by the University of Southern California Schaeffer Center for Health Policy and Economics, patients overpay for prescriptions 23 percent of the time. Clawbacks on brand-name prescription drugs averaged \$13.46 per prescription. Generic drug clawbacks were lower - an average of \$7.32 per prescription. [Six states](#), including Connecticut, prohibit gag clauses. [Twenty more states](#) are considering similar laws.

### **Why Does U.S. Healthcare Cost So Much? Some New Answers**

Americans spend almost [twice as much](#) as other high-income countries on medical care. Explanations for this difference usually involve wastefulness, patients requesting unnecessary services, and too many specialist physicians.

Researchers at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health analyzed and compared data from key international organizations and country-specific data sources for the United States and ten other high-income countries. They came up with different explanations: our usage of healthcare services was similar to the other countries and so was our number of physician specialists. But in the United States the cost of healthcare salaries, drugs, medical devices, and administrative costs were all much higher.

### **Big Pharma Spends More on Patient Advocacy Groups than Lobbying**

*Kaiser Health News* has created a database, "Pre\$cription for Power", to track pharmaceutical company donations to patient advocacy groups like the American Diabetes Association. Pre\$cription for Power contains data from charitable giving reports and federal 990 regulatory filings for 14 of the 20 pharmaceutical companies in the S&P 500. These companies spent \$116 million on patient advocacy groups compared to only \$63 million on lobbying. Six of the 14 drug makers gave a million dollars or more to individual advocacy groups that represent patients who rely on drugs manufactured by those companies. Advocacy groups used some of this money to fly patients to give testimony and train them to how to lobby for their drugs.

### **Medicare Advantage Plans to Cover Groceries, Rides, and More**

Insurers offering Medicare Advantage Plans have been approved to cover nontraditional services like air conditioners, healthy groceries, and rides to medical appointments in 2019. The intent of these supplemental services is to help older adults lead healthier, more independent lives. However, there is concern that the majority of Americans covered under traditional Medicare will be disadvantaged.

### **How to Find the Best Hospice Care**

Hospice care is not just for patients who are expected to die within days or weeks. It is also a wonderful service for patients for whom the focus of care is on managing pain and disease symptoms. Hospice care includes in-home nursing care, help with personal care tasks like bathing, and spiritual and emotional support for both patients and family members. How do you find the

best hospice care for your loved one? The website [DailyCaring.com](http://DailyCaring.com) offers a list of 22 essential questions for evaluating hospice care companies.

### How Healthy is Your State?

How does your state compare to others, or the nation as a whole on health issues like preventive services for women, access to physicians, or the cost of prescription drugs? A new free [interactive tool](#) from the Kaiser Family Foundation lets you create customized reports for one or multiple states using hundreds of health indicators. Once users create a report, they can interact with it by rearranging columns; adding indicators or adding states. Users can also download their report and share it with others.

### Emotional Intelligence Toolkit

Do you have difficulty managing stress or controlling your actions? How about understanding emotions, or communicating with others? According to [HelpGuide](#), a nonprofit mental health organization that develops self-help guides, you may need an emotional intelligence tune-up. HelpGuide's "Emotional Intelligence Toolkit" is a step-by-step guide for developing or improving specific emotional intelligence skills. Each step is accompanied by a video demonstrating the skill to be learned. According to HealthGuide, using these skills can lead to a "lighter and brighter" life.

### Forgetfulness After Surgery

Memory loss after surgery in older adults is a real thing. The condition is called "postoperative cognitive dysfunction" or POCD. Patients complain they are forgetful, find demanding mental tasks hard, and cannot concentrate. How common is POCD? According to a [Kaiser Health News](#) story, estimates vary. The first [international study](#) of POCD suggested almost 26% of patients had POCD one week after a major non-cardiac surgery like hip replacement. Almost ten percent of patients in this study reported memory problems three months after surgery. A [more recent study](#) found 59% of older patients experienced POCD immediately after hip or knee replacement surgery and 42% still had POCD two years later. Current evidence suggests the stress of surgery rather than anesthesia drugs may be responsible. Unfortunately, most older patients considering surgery are not informed by their physician of the risk for POCD.

## Would Legalizing Medical or Recreational Marijuana Solve the Opioid Epidemic?

A recent study in *JAMA Internal Medicine* reported that states with medical or recreational marijuana laws prescribed fewer opioids than states without marijuana laws. An article on *STATNews.com* argues that easing access to marijuana is a bad idea. The author cites evidence of marijuana's harmful effects including mood, anxiety, and psychotic conditions, and cognitive decline. Adolescents, notes the author, are especially vulnerable to marijuana's harms.

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### More Health Information You Can Use:

- Yet another study about whether [antidepressants](#) work.
- [Fluorescent dyes](#) help surgeons spot hidden cancer cells.
- [New homes](#) in Austin and Palm Beach come with voice assistant Alexa pre-installed.
- Two-minute video explains how the gene editing technique [CRISPR](#) works.
- Government resource for free [oral health](#) publications.
- Check out [Wirecutter.com's](#) picks for the best bed pillows.

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