CALIFORNIA WATCH

Ventura County Star: As Many As 6,800 Immigrants in Ventura County Could Gain Medi-Cal Coverage
Between 3,000 and 6,800 immigrants 18 and younger living illegally in Ventura County could receive full government-paid health insurance in May through a controversial California law. Immigration and health care advocates of a law that opens the door to full Medi-Cal coverage are pushing families to begin enrolling now. (Kisken, 2/15)

The San Jose Mercury News: California Legislature Poised to Pass Replacement Tax on Health Care Plans
After months of uncertainty, the Legislature appears poised to approve a tax on health care plans that would generate $1.27 billion annually and could substantially boost funding for developmentally disabled Californians for the first time in more than a decade. If lawmakers approve the tax in a series of votes scheduled for this week, it would replace an existing tax on health care plans that brings in about $270 million less and is set to expire in July because it doesn't comply with new Obama administration rules dictating how states may levy those types of taxes. (Calefati and Seipel, 2/14)

Los Angeles Times: Birth Control Pills without Prescriptions, Coming Soon to California under New Law
Under a law expected to go into effect by April, women in California will be able to stop by their neighborhood pharmacy and buy birth control pills without a prescription. Proponents argue that easing women's access to birth control will reduce unintended pregnancies, which make up as many as half of all pregnancies nationwide. (Karlamangla, 2/14)

CAMPAIGN 2016

The New York Times: Republican Debate Takeaways: Saturday Night Fighting
The Republican candidates debated on Saturday night as if it were one last chance to break through and take down their opponents — and for a few of them, it probably was. ... [Donald Trump] ridiculed Lindsey Graham, South Carolina's senior senator, and described Planned Parenthood as a group that provides important health services to women. (He said he disapproved of its role performing abortions.) ... Mr. Kasich continued to call for a lower-key and more genial race, defended his decision to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act and said that government has a compassionate role to play in people's lives, arguing, “Economic growth is not an end unto itself.” (Burns, 2/14)

With his expansive plans to increase the size and role of government, Senator Bernie Sanders has provoked a debate not only with his Democratic rival for president, Hillary Clinton, but also with liberal-leaning economists who share his goals but question his numbers and political realism. The reviews of some of these economists, especially on Mr. Sanders’s health care plans, suggest that Mrs. Clinton could have been too conservative in their debate last week when she said his agenda in total would increase the size of the federal government by 40 percent. That level would surpass any government expansion since the buildup in World War II. (Calmes, 2/15)
HEALTH LAW ISSUES AND IMPLEMENTATION

Kaiser Health News: Delay of New Health Law Forms May Confuse Some Taxpayers
As the 2015 tax filing season gets underway, tax preparers said a delay in new health law tax forms is causing confusion for some consumers, while others want details about exemptions from increasingly stiff penalties for not having insurance. ... This is the first year that employers, insurers and government programs are required to send consumers tax forms that report whether they offered or provided health insurance that was considered affordable and adequate under the law. (Andrews, 2/16)

PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION

KPCC: New Research Finds Surprising Type 2 Diabetes Links
UCLA researchers mined patients' electronic health records to uncover some surprising risk factors for Type 2 diabetes. First, the good news: being prone to migraines reduces your risk for diabetes by the same amount as being 29 years younger. But having a history of viral infections and chlamydia increases your risk for diabetes by almost as much as having a high body mass index. Their research was published today in the Journal of Biomedical Informatics. It's unclear why these other conditions increase people's risk for diabetes. (Plevin, 2/16)

NPR: Popular Heartburn Pills Can Be Hard to Stop, and May Be Risky
When Marcella Lafayette started having really bad heartburn, she went to her doctor to see if there was anything that might help. Her doctor diagnosed her with gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD, and prescribed a drug called a proton pump inhibitor, or PPI. The drug worked, but Lafayette soon started having other problems, such as muscle weakness and severe leg cramping. ... Many people have trouble discontinuing PPIs because the amount of acid in their digestive systems surges when they stop taking the drug. (Stein, 2/15)

The Washington Post: Mysterious and Fast-Moving, Zika Virus Has World's Health Leaders Scrambling
Global health authorities and government officials are mobilizing to battle the fast-spreading Zika virus, sending response teams to affected regions, issuing travel warnings for pregnant women, accelerating vaccine trials and even deploying mosquito-fighting troops to hard-hit areas in Brazil. Stung by criticism that the world’s response to the Ebola epidemic was halting and disjointed, officials in Latin America, the US and Europe say they are determined to do better against a new foe that, in some ways, is more daunting than the hemorrhagic virus that killed 11,000 people in West Africa. (Sun and Dennis, 2/13)

WOMEN’S HEALTH

The Washington Post: Dozens of Groups Subpoenaed as House Fetal Tissue Probe Accelerates
A special House committee formed amid the debate over Planned Parenthood’s handling of fetal tissue has launched a broad investigation into the matter, requesting documents from more than 30 agencies and organizations, including some of the nation’s most prominent research institutions. Critics have raised concerns about the breadth of the Republican-led inquiry and are worried about the privacy implications of the wide-ranging requests. (DeBonis, 2/15)
MARKETPLACE

**Bloomberg: Express Scripts Giving 'Extra Scrutiny' to Valeant Prescriptions**
Express Scripts Holding Co. is carefully scrutinizing prescriptions for products made by Valeant Pharmaceuticals International Inc., making sure the pharmacy manager’s rules are being followed. ... Valeant last year was accused of working with a network of pharmacies to boost sales of its drugs and get them reimbursed by health insurers and pharmacy benefit managers like Express Scripts, even when there were cheaper generics available. (Langreth and Koons, 2/12)

EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

**Los Angeles Times: Obama's Budget Plan Would Allow Greater Scrutiny of High Drug Prices**
Buried deep within President Obama’s $4-trillion budget plan are a couple of healthcare proposals that could change everything for U.S. consumers. The fact that the drug industry wasted no time in dismissing the ideas — and that their Republican friends in Congress said they wouldn't even look at them — should tell you something big was afoot. (David Lazarus, 2/16)
California Healthline: Poverty and Violence Linked to Childhood Trauma, Poor Health
Poor kids who grow up in dangerous neighborhoods are far more likely to be traumatized as children and less likely to overcome their adversity, according to a new study by the Oakland-based Prevention Institute. And that dynamic frequently leads to poor health in adulthood. (Gorn, 2/17)

The California Health Report: As Vaccination Mandate Rolls Out, Some Parents Fret
Senate Bill 277, which goes into effect July 1, eliminates personal belief exemptions and requires children to be vaccinated in order to attend public or private school or day care. Parents will have to show vaccination records to enroll their child in a new school, kindergarten or seventh grade. The only way out is to get a release from doctors for medical reasons (such as having an allergic reaction to shots) or to home school. (Renner, 2/16)

The Sacramento Bee: California’s Health Exchange Bent Own Rules in Awarding Big Contracts
A new audit slams Covered California, the agency tasked with enrolling state residents in Obamacare, for not following rules when awarding lucrative contracts without a competitive-bidding process. The report discovered nine out of 40 justifications given for the sole-source contracts were insufficient based on the agency’s own standards. Covered California’s policy at the time allowed sole-source contracts, but generally only when timeliness or unique expertise were required for the job. (Cadelago, 2/16)

The Associated Press: Report: 3 of 5 Californians May Have Had Data Stolen in 2015
California’s attorney general says as many as three in five Californians may have had electronic records stolen last year. Attorney General Kamala Harris said Tuesday that there were 178 data breaches in California endangering 24 million records. Her report blames a few large breaches for most of the thefts. That includes records exposed by health insurer Anthem Inc. affecting more than 10 million Californians. (2/16)

KQED: Mobile Clinics Serve California’s Growing Homeless Youth Population
In his 20 years working in this teen health van, Ammerman has treated thousands of uninsured and homeless adolescents ages 24 and under. Twice a week, Ammerman and two nurses park the clinic at continuation high schools and other places frequented by at-risk adolescents in Santa Clara, San Mateo and San Francisco counties. The van is a community project of the Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital Stanford and Children’s Health Fund, with support from Samsung. The team provides free medical, nutrition and mental health services, including reproductive health care and treatment for chronic illnesses, substance abuse and depression. All medications are free and provided at the time of consultation. (Romero, 2/15)

CAPITOL HILL WATCH

The Hill: Democrats Protest Subpoenas in Planned Parenthood Investigation
Democrats are urging the GOP-led House committee investigating Planned Parenthood to halt a round of subpoenas that they argue will endanger abortion doctors and patients. Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.), who leads the House’s select committee, plans to issue three subpoenas this week in an effort to collect information about fetal tissue research in the U.S. – something that Democrats say will turn into a national database used for political purposes. (Ferris, 2/16)
CAMPAIGN 2016

Politico: Clinton, Sanders Blaze Different Trails on Supreme Court Nomination
Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders have expressed their outrage at Republican threats to block President Barack Obama’s choice to replace Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. That’s where the similarities end. For Clinton, the opening on the court has provided a chance to aggressively talk about abortion rights, immigration reform and voting rights — issues that rile up her base and closely align her with the sitting president. Clinton, with deep support from Hispanic voters and the full weight of abortion rights groups behind her, reminds those blocs of their uncertain futures by singling out individual cases that could directly affect them. (Debenedetti, 2/16)

QUALITY

Kaiser Health News: Insurers and Medicare Agree on Measures Tracking Doctors’ Quality
The federal government and the insurance industry released on Tuesday an initial set of measures of physician performance that they hope will reduce the glut of conflicting metrics doctors now must report. The measures are intended to make it easier for Medicare, patients, insurers and employers to assess quality and determine pay. (Rau, 2/16)

PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Kaiser Health News: Needle Exchanges Can Now Get Federal Funding
Needle exchanges could receive a financial boost this year following a decision by Congress to lift a ban on federal funding. As abuse of prescription drugs and opiates continues to spread across the nation, more states are considering exchanges as a way to save lives. The change in federal policy, part of a spending bill approved earlier this month, allows funding only in areas where drug-related cases of hepatitis and HIV are rising or are likely to. State and city health departments will make that determination along with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, according to the legislation. (Gorman, 2/17)

Kaiser Health News: Task Force: Not Enough Evidence to Recommend ‘For or Against’ Universal Autism Screening for Very Young Kids
Sparking strong reaction from doctors and child development experts, an influential task force says there’s “insufficient evidence” to argue definitely that the benefits of screening all young children for autism outweigh the harms. “There’s not enough evidence for us to recommend for or against screening in children for autism under 30 months,” said David Grossman, vice chair of the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force and a Seattle pediatrician. (Luthra, 2/16)

The Food and Drug Administration on Tuesday issued new guidelines for blood banks intended to help prevent the contamination of the nation’s blood supply with the Zika virus. Among other measures, the agency called for blood banks in areas where the virus is transmitted locally — like Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands — to import whole blood and red blood cells from regions without an outbreak instead of using local donations. (Saint Louis, 2/16)
The Washington Post: WHO Says $56 Million Needed to Fight Zika Spread in Coming Months
The World Health Organization says it will take $56 million to kickstart a coordinated international response to the Zika virus outbreak racing through much of the Americas, and the WHO plans to tap a newly created emergency contingency fund to pay for the initial efforts. In a lengthy action plan published Tuesday, the organization said a hefty chunk of the money will go toward disease surveillance, which will include tracking new Zika cases and the suspected birth defects and rare autoimmune syndrome that scientists suspect are linked to the mosquito-borne virus. (Dennis, 2/16)

NPR: Misuse of ADHD Drugs by Young Adults Drives Rise in ER Visits
It's no secret that stimulant medications such as Adderall that are prescribed to treat symptoms of ADHD are sometimes used as "study drugs" aimed at boosting cognitive performance. And emergency room visits linked to misuse of the drug are on the rise, according to a study published Tuesday in the Journal of Clinical Psychiatry. ... Overall, the study found that nonmedical use of Adderall and generic versions of the drug increased by 67 percent among adults between 2006 and 2011. The findings are based on data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health. The number of emergency room visits involving Adderall misuse increased from 862 visits in 2006 to 1,489 in 2011 according to data from the Drug Abuse Warning Network. (Aubrey, 2/16)

MARKETPLACE

USA Today: Pfizer Settles Medicaid Claims For $785 Million
The long-running case involves practices relating to the calculation of Medicaid rebates by drug maker Wyeth for its drug Protonix between 2001 and 2006. Pfizer acquired Wyeth in 2009. ... Officials had said the miscalculations amounted to hundreds of millions of dollars and the Justice Department had estimated total damages could total more than $2 billion. ... Back in December 2012, Pfizer paid $55 million to resolve allegations that Wyeth promoted Protonix for uses that were not approved by the Food and Drug Administration. (Snider, 2/16)

EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

Los Angeles Times: Dirty Little Secret: Insurers Actually are Making a Mint from Obamacare
For months now, headlines about the Affordable Care Act have focused on complaints from big insurers that they haven't been making money from individual insurance plans mandated by the act. Here's what they haven't been saying so loudly: They're making scads of money from Obamacare — so much that almost universally, they're expanding their participation. What's the catch? The big profits have come not from the insurance exchanges, but via the ACA's Medicaid expansion, in which the largest insurers have been playing a major role. (Michael Hiltzik, 2/16)
Sacramento Business Journal: Why This Move by Covered California Could Mean Big Business for VSP
Covered California on Wednesday announced it selected VSP Vision Care as its vision insurance provider for adults statewide. Unlike other health coverage offered through the state's health insurance exchange, the vision insurance is not eligible for subsidies under the Affordable Care Act. But the move opens a potentially big market for the company because consumers will be able to buy VSP's insurance via a link from the Covered California website. (Anderson, 2/18)

CAMPAIGN 2016

NBC News: Trump on Sanders: 'We're Very Similar' in This Way
Consider a political outsider who is tapping into voter anger, delivering a populist message and drawing raucous thousands to rallies. He wants the hedge fund managers to pay more taxes and argues that there should be health care for everyone. Sound familiar? (Timm, 2/17)

HEALTH LAW ISSUES AND IMPLEMENTATION

Kaiser Health News: California Marketplace May Require Insurers to Pay Agent Commissions
California’s health exchange may require its health plans to pay sales commissions to insurance agents to keep insurers from shunning the sickest and costliest patients. Covered California is working on a proposal that would force the plans to pay commissions effective next year, said Executive Director Peter Lee. The proposed rules could apply to regular and special enrollment periods, and would leave the specific commission amount or percentage up to insurers, he said. The issue is expected to be discussed Thursday at Covered California’s monthly board meeting. (Terhune, 2/18)

The San Jose Mercury News: Obamacare: Are Covered California's Numbers Plateauing?
With Covered California’s announcement Wednesday that 1.57 million Californians selected health plans during its third open enrollment period, at least one health care expert believes that the nation’s bellwether state in implementing the Affordable Care Act is now essentially running in place. Although the latest numbers don’t say how many people have paid for their plan to complete their enrollment -- the only figure that really counts and which will be available in a few months -- some experts say that the net gain from last year’s 1.3 million total could be minimal. (Seipel, 2/17)

HEALTH IT

Los Angeles Times: Hollywood Hospital Pays $17,000 in Bitcoins to Hackers Who Took Control of Computers
“The malware locks systems by encrypting files and demanding ransom to obtain the decryption key. The quickest and most efficient way to restore our systems and administrative functions was to pay the ransom and obtain the decryption key,” Hollywood Presbyterian CEO Allen Stefanek said. “In the best interest of restoring normal operations, we did this.” Stefanek said patient care was never compromised, nor were hospital records. (Winton, 2/17)
PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION

The Washington Post: Mexico Confirms Zika Virus Cases in Pregnant Women as Pope Francis Exits the Country
The spread of the Zika virus, which has accelerated debates over contraception and abortion in Latin American countries that have been hit hardest, continues in Mexico, where Pope Francis has spent the past week. Mexico's health department said on Tuesday it has confirmed six pregnant women who are infected with the virus, which came as the pope was about to leave the region after a six-day trip to Central America. The pontiff did not mention the virus during his trip, and the Vatican has yet to issue a statement on the issue. (Pulliam Bailey, 2/17)

The New York Times: Testosterone Gel Has Modest Benefits for Men, Study Says
More than a million men have smeared testosterone gels on their bodies in recent years, hoping it would rejuvenate them, energize them, and increase their libido. But until now, there has never been a rigorous study asking if there were any real benefits to testosterone therapy for healthy men with so-called low T. The first results of such research were published Wednesday in The New England Journal of Medicine. Although it found at best modest benefits, mostly in sexual functioning, it is a landmark study, said Dr. Eric S. Orwoll, a professor of medicine at Oregon Health and Science University, because it provides the first credible data on testosterone's effects on some of the problems it is thought to resolve. (Kolata, 2/17)

MARKETPLACE

CBS: Dignity Health Pays $5.9M to Settle False Claims Act Allegations
San Francisco-based Dignity Health settled with the U.S. Department of Justice for $5.9 million to resolve False Claims Act allegations that they improperly billed Medicare for implantation of cardiac devices, Justice Department officials announced Wednesday. Dignity Health, and its 18 affiliated hospitals were among the most recent batch of 51 hospitals nationwide to settle with the Justice Department. In 2015, the department settled with 457 hospitals for more than $250 million. The final 51 hospitals will pay the Justice Department more than $23 million. The settlements with all 508 hospitals stemmed from allegations by the Justice Department, and reported by whistleblowers, that hospitals improperly billed Medicare for the implantation of cardiac devices in Medicare patients in violation of Medicare coverage requirements. Justice Department officials said that settlements have been reached but that there has been no determination of liability in these cases. (Albarazi, 2/17)

EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

The Los Angeles Times: More Signs That 'Gaming' by the Sick is Not a Problem in Obamacare
The one common element in assertions that thousands of Americans are "gaming" Obamacare by not signing up for health insurance until they get sick, thereby sticking beleaguered insurance companies with a big bill, is that none of these assertions come attached to any hard numbers. Late last year, the Department of Health and Human Services invited insurers to produce the numbers, if they had them. It did so by proposing to tighten up on the so-called special enrollment periods, or SEPs, that allowed individuals to enroll in health plans outside the once-a-year open-enrollment window, and asking insurers to submit comments and data on the proposal. (Michael Hiltzik, 2/17)
The Los Angeles Times: With No Reproductive Rights, Many Latin American Women Could Be at the Mercy of the Zika Virus

Now that researchers have identified a tangible link between the Zika virus and fetal brain deformation, pregnant women and those of childbearing age in the Latin American countries hardest hit by the mosquito-borne virus will have to make tough decisions about their reproductive future. Use birth control? Abstain? Abort if there's evidence of potentially lethal birth defects? Or at least that's how it ought to go. (2/17)
California Healthline: Covered California Takes Aim at System Gamers
It may soon become harder to enroll in Covered California health plans outside the regular open-enrollment period. Covered California, the state health insurance exchange, wants to tighten the rules for special-enrollment periods by making consumers provide documentation proving they’re eligible. The change, proposed by Covered California’s staff, comes amid concerns that some people are waiting until they get sick to sign up for health insurance during a special-enrollment period, driving up costs. (Bazar, 2/19)

Los Angeles Times: Here’s What the Assembly GOP Wants in Negotiations for Healthcare-Plans Tax
Assembly Republicans are bellying up to the bargaining table over Gov. Jerry Brown's proposed tax package for healthcare plans, signaling a new phase in the negotiations that have slogged on for more than a year. A document obtained by The Times lays out the political and policy wish list for the Assembly GOP caucus. Most significantly, they want to direct more than $800 million in spending made possible by the new tax. (Mason, 2/18)

PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Kaiser Health News: Supreme Court Vacancy Creates Muddle for Future of Reproductive Rights
The sudden death of Associate Justice Antonin Scalia has complicated the fate of many major cases before the Supreme Court this term. But few issues face as much turmoil going forward as women’s reproductive rights. In March the court is scheduled to hear two separate cases; one on abortion and one on contraceptive insurance coverage. And the absence of Scalia means predictions of what may be the state of the law come the end of the court’s term this June are being turned, if not on their heads, at least sideways. (Rovner, 2/19)

STAT: Breaking Down What the Pope's Nod to Birth Control Means for Public Health
They were only brief remarks, but Pope Francis’s response to a question about the use of contraception in the midst of the Zika outbreak has already prompted debate about its implications for public health. (Joseph, 2/18)

The Washington Post: World Bank Announces $150 Million to Fight Zika Outbreak
The funding, being made available immediately, comes after extensive consultations with governments in the region, the bank said in a statement. The bank said it could provide additional financing if needed. Based on its projections, the short-term economic impact of Zika on the region is likely to be about $3.5 billion. The countries that are likely to see significant impacts include: Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Argentina, Belize and Jamaica. (Dennis and Sun, 2/18)

STAT: More Than Just an Opioid Crisis: Deaths from Anti-Anxiety Drugs on the Rise, Too
Deaths from opioids grab news headlines, government budgets, and the futures of troubled people. But these deadly drugs often have help. Benzodiazepines — underestimated and, some say, overprescribed — are killing people, too. (Samuels, 2/18)
MARKETPLACE

The Associated Press: IBM to Spend $2.6B on Truven Health, Boost Watson System
IBM is paying $2.6 billion to buy Truven Health Analytics, a provider of cloud-based health care data, and bolster the health care capabilities of its Watson cognitive computing system. The Armonk, N.Y., company says the deal will bring in more than 8,500 clients and allow it to house health-related data representing an aggregate of about 300 million patient lives. (2/18)

HEALTH POLICY RESEARCH

Reuters: Study Suggests Zika Can Cross Placenta, Adds to Microcephaly Link
In what experts describe as another piece of evidence linking Zika with the risk of birth defects, researchers on Wednesday reported finding the virus in the amniotic fluid of two pregnant women whose fetuses were diagnosed with microcephaly. In a study in the Lancet Infectious Diseases journal, the scientists said their finding suggests Zika virus can cross the placental barrier, but does not prove it causes microcephaly, a condition in which babies are born with abnormally small heads. More research is needed to understand the link, they said. (Kelland, 2/17)

Reuters: Family Caregivers May Be Sacrificing their Own Health to Help Loved Ones
Many family caregivers in the U.S. provide unpaid medical aid and other services to loved ones at the expense of their own financial, physical and mental health, a study suggests. Nationwide, an estimated 14.7 million family caregivers assist 7.7 million older adults who live in the community rather than in institutions like nursing homes. These family members often help with daily activities like eating, bathing and dressing. (Rapaport, 2/15)

Reuters: Eating Lots of Fish in Pregnancy Linked to Obesity Risk for Kids
Pregnant women who eat more than three servings of fish a week – that is, more than the maximum recommended by U.S. health regulators – may face an increased risk of having babies who grow rapidly and become obese in childhood, a research review suggests. Previous research has linked one pollutant in fish – mercury – to damage of the nervous, digestive and immune systems, lungs, kidneys, skin and eyes. Because of this, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and Environmental Protection Agency encourage pregnant women to limit consumption to no more than three servings a week. (Rapaport, 2/15)

EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

The Los Angeles: Finally, Some Action on Exide from Jerry Brown
Gov. Jerry Brown listened. After residents, local officials and activists criticized his administration's excruciatingly slow pace in cleaning up lead-tainted homes near the shuttered Exide plant, the governor has stepped up with a proposal to spend $176.6 million to test and decontaminate affected properties within a year. (2/18)

DHNR is a daily compilation of news stories from GCHP's Communications Department.

Certain news organizations are protected via a paywall requiring the purchase of a subscription to view their content.