California Healthline: Big Insurance Deal under Scrutiny in California

Last week, state regulators signed off on Centene’s $7 billion purchase of fellow health insurer Health Net. But that’s a dinky deal compared to Anthem’s proposed $54 billion acquisition of Cigna, which Tuesday undergoes public review by the California Department of Insurance and its politically ambitious commissioner, Dave Jones. Jones must approve the deal or reject it, along with the state’s other insurance regulator, the Department of Managed Health Care, which already has conducted its own hearings. The stakes are high. A rejection by California — given the state’s huge market — could jeopardize the acquisition altogether. (Gorn, 3/28)

Kaiser Health News: Health Care Fades Into the Background of 2016 Election Cycle

With Obamacare battles largely behind us, presidential candidates in 2016 seem focused on other issues. Health care played starring roles in the 2008 and 2012 election cycles. President Obama’s Affordable Care Act became the battle cry of politicians hoping to ascend to the highest office in the land. But Obamacare passed through the gauntlets of the U.S. Congress and Supreme Court, and came out intact. Whether it’s fatigue with the topic of health care, a shift in the public’s priorities, or other campaign year distractions, how we pay for our doctor’s visits has fallen from the top of the nation’s priorities list. (Rovner, 3/28)

Politico: Cruz’s Missing Obamacare Replacement Plan

Everyone knows how Ted Cruz feels about Obamacare. He’s the guy who shut down the government in a bid to kill it — and should he reach the White House, he’d take a blowtorch to the law. But Cruz isn’t very clear about what — if anything — he’d do to replace a law covering 20 million people. And some establishment Republicans suggest that he address this head-on before the pivotal April 5 primary in Wisconsin, where Republican leaders have been more aggressive in fleshing out alternative health plans. (Pradhan and Demko, 3/27)


The nation’s top health officials are stepping up calls to require doctors to log in to pill-tracking databases before prescribing painkillers and other high-risk drugs. The move is part of a multi-pronged strategy by the Obama administration to tame an epidemic of abuse and death tied to opioid painkillers like Vicodin and OxyContin. But physician groups see a requirement to check databases before prescribing popular drugs for pain, anxiety and other ailments as being overly burdensome. (Perrone, 3/28)

Politico: Slew of Anti-Abortion Laws May Thwart Zika Research

Even as mosquitoes carrying the Zika virus advance northward, lawmakers in 18 states are trying to block the fetal tissue research that might reveal the keys to unlocking the disease and preventing the massive birth defects associated with it. The furor from the Planned Parenthood sting videos is driving the tide of bills, which range from outright bans on research using aborted tissue to prohibitions on tissue donations. Scientists say such laws in states like Florida, Arizona, Ohio and Indiana — along with an escalating probe of fetal tissue research by House Republicans — are becoming roadblocks to the research needed to combat Zika. (Norman, 3/27)
MARKETPLACE

The New York Times: Health Savings Accounts: Unloved, But Worthwhile
Health savings accounts offer a rare, triple-tax benefit to those who are able to contribute and who qualify to save for future medical needs — which, among other things, means having a health insurance plan with a deductible of at least $1,300. Money goes into an H.S.A. tax-free, grows tax-free and is withdrawn tax-free, if spent on eligible medical costs. Yet some people find it difficult to commit to building up an H.S.A. to save for health needs. (Carrns, 3/25)

Los Angeles Times: Two More Deaths May Be Linked to Contaminated Medical Scopes
Two patients died and six more were sickened in a new outbreak suspected of being caused by contaminated medical scopes, according to a regulatory report by device manufacturer Olympus Corp. The report shows that hospitals are continuing to use a device that was recalled in January, which experts have found to be extremely difficult to disinfect. The name and location of the hospital was not revealed in the report. (Petersen, 3/25)

EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

Los Angeles Times: Block Grants are Just Budget Cuts in Disguise — and the Targets are Antipoverty Programs
The most popular panacea offered by conservatives for the supposed burden of federal funding that comes with strings attached is the “block grant.” The idea is that states and localities know best how to serve their citizens — especially their disadvantaged citizens — so the feds should just give them bundles of money for social programs and let them decide how to spend it. Much better than the government trying to manage these programs from far-off Washington, D.C. (Michael Hiltzik, 3/25)

The Huffington Post: The Supreme Court’s Conservatives Don’t Seem to Know What Obamacare Actually Does
The Supreme Court has taken four big whacks at the Affordable Care Act in as many years. But the conservative justices still don’t seem to understand how it works. During oral arguments this week in Zubik v. Burwell — a set of seven challenges to Obamacare’s contraceptive-coverage mandate on behalf of religious nonprofits — Chief Justice John Roberts and his colleagues on the court’s conservative wing gave the impression that they don’t really grasp what the ACA’s health insurance exchanges do, or indeed how the market for health insurance itself even functions. (Jeffrey Young and Cristian Farias, 3/24)

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

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KQED: New Database Tracks Women's Wellness across California
The nonprofit California Budget and Policy Center has launched a new database detailing how California women are faring in a variety of areas. Among the categories it drills into are health, economic security and political empowerment. (Orr, 3/29)

California Healthline: Marin Group Uses Local Data to Fight Fatal Prescription Overdoses
Marin County, by most measures, is among the healthiest counties in California. But every two weeks on average in 2012 and 2013, someone in Marin died of an accidental prescription drug overdose, often from taking too many pain-killing opioid drugs such as Oxycontin. In response, members of the Marin community formed a grassroots organization to come up with ways to reduce that death rate. (Ibarra, 3/29)

California Health Report: The Death Cafe: Step Right In
Today, we talk about death. There is perhaps no topic in American culture more taboo. We avoid it. We fear it. And it may even underlie one of our last remaining prejudices: ageism. The international Death Cafe movement parallels similar cultural shifts to explore a topic many consider integral to life itself: without embracing death, they say, how can we truly live? Since their American introduction in 2012, Death Cafes are sprouting up around the state that allow Californians the opportunity to discuss death openly, courageously and compassionately. (Perry, 3/28)

California Health Report: Healthy Sundays in Orange County
On the second Sunday of each month, the Orange County Great Park in Irvine looks like a county fair. Balloons and banners; families with kids in strollers; mobile trucks holding eye catching displays with greeters inviting families in. …Families can dip into healthy snacks, discuss parenting concerns with doctors and nurses, get a flu shot, sign up for health insurance and other benefits, have their teeth checked and take home free fruits and vegetables. This is Clinic in the Park, a five year old innovation that brings health care to under-served families in Orange County each month. (Kritz, 3/28)

CAPITOL HILL WATCH

Reuters: Obama to Announce Steps to Fight Heroin, Opioid Epidemic
U.S. President Barack Obama is set to announce steps on Tuesday to expand treatment for people addicted to heroin and prescription painkillers, the White House said. Obama will travel to a summit in Atlanta to meet addicts in recovery, family members, medical professionals and law enforcement officials to talk about the opioid epidemic. (3/29)

PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Research into immunotherapy, which cancer experts are calling the most promising approach in decades, will get a big boost Tuesday when Michael Bloomberg and other philanthropists announce $125 million in donations to Johns Hopkins University for a new institute focused solely on the therapy and accelerated breakthroughs for patients. (McGinley, 3/29)
Kaiser Health News: A Nurse’s Lesson: Babies in Opioid Withdrawal Still Need Mom
Like many hospitals across the country, [Hospital of Central Connecticut] has seen the number of babies born with neonatal abstinence syndrome go up dramatically in recent years. The National Institute of Drug Abuse reports more than 21,000 infants in the U.S. were born in withdrawal from opioids in 2012, the most recent year for which data are available. The hospital says each baby costs roughly $50,000 to treat. …But delivering that care means changing hospital systems and attitudes about addiction among doctors and nurses. (Cohen, 3/29)

MARKETPLACE

Capital Public Radio: Physician Group Calls on Government to Rein in Drug Prices
It’s not just patients who are getting tired of ever-rising drug prices. Doctors are joining the chorus of frustration. The latest voice? The American College of Physicians, whose membership includes 143,000 internal medicine doctors, published a position paper Monday calling for the government and industry to take steps to rein in spiraling costs. (Kodjak, 3/29)

A Massachusetts Institute of Technology economist and Harvard oncologist have a proposal to get highly effective but prohibitively expensive drugs into consumers’ hands: health care installment loans. Writing last month in the journal Science Translational Medicine, the authors liken drug loans to mortgages, noting that both can enable consumers to buy big-ticket items requiring a hefty up-front payment that they could not otherwise afford. (Andrews, 3/29)

Reuters: U.S. Out-of-Hospital Births on the Rise in the U.S.
Giving birth outside of a hospital has become more common in the U.S., especially for white women, with almost 60,000 out-of-hospital births in 2014, according to a new study. “I think it speaks to some women’s growing discomfort with the standard hospital-based system of childbirth in the U.S.,” said lead author Marian F. MacDorman of the Maryland Population Research Center at the University of Maryland in College Park. (Doyle, 3/28)

Los Angeles Times: Pharmaceutical Industry is Lobbying Hard against an L.A. County Drug Take-Back Proposal
Drug manufacturers have mounted a vigorous lobbying campaign against the county proposal, which would require pharmaceutical companies to finance a disposal program for unused medications and syringes. Proponents say the program would reduce chemicals ending up in the water supply, and would help curb prescription drug abuse by making sure that unused drugs are safely disposed of rather than stockpiled in medicine cabinets. The opponents say it would be costly and have little effect on the problem. (Sewell, 3/28)

Bloomberg: U.S. Seeks Records of 80,000 Novartis 'Sham' Events for Doctors
The U.S. is asking Novartis AG to provide records of about 80,000 “sham” events in which the government says doctors were wined and dined so they would prescribe the company’s cardiovascular drugs to their patients. (Pettersson, 3/27)
HEALTH IT

The Washington Post: Virus Infects MedStar Health System’s Computers, Forcing an Online Shutdown
A virus infected the computer network of MedStar Health early Monday morning, forcing the Washington health-care behemoth to shut down its email and vast records database and raising additional concerns about the security of hospitals nationwide. The FBI is investigating the breach, which comes just weeks after similar cyberattacks on at least three other medical institutions in California and Kentucky. Still, MedStar officials said they had found “no evidence that information has been stolen.” (Cox, Turner and Zapotosky, 3/28)

WOMEN’S HEALTH

Reuters: Telemedicine Could Expand Access to Medical Abortions
Women in the U.S. without reproductive health services close to home might have an easier time getting medical abortions if they could consult with doctors online instead of scheduling in-person visits, some providers argue. Although surgical abortions require clinic visits, roughly one quarter of abortions are done with medication and might be provided with telemedicine – using webcams and video chats to diagnose and treat these patients, Dr. Elizabeth Raymond of Gynuity Health Projects in New York and colleagues argue in JAMA Internal Medicine. (Rapaport, 3/28)

EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

Bloomberg: Hold the Obamacare Celebrations
President Barack Obama and his allies are celebrating the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, on the sixth anniversary of its passage. They say it has provided insurance coverage to millions of Americans and come in below cost. They are right to claim that many Americans have benefited from the law. But the benefits are overstated, and the law’s harms look set to rise. (Ponnuru, 3/28)
California Healthline: CT Scans for Minor Injuries on a Rapid Rise in California Emergency Rooms
Though CT scans are expensive and pose some radiation danger, their use on patients with minor injuries is rapidly increasing in California. Between 2005 and 2013, according to University of California, San Francisco and Stanford University researchers, CT use doubled in California emergency rooms for minor trauma injuries. The researchers, whose findings recently appeared in the Journal of Surgical Research, take no stand on overuse, but point out that physicians should exercise their clinical judgment on when tests are needed and when they’re not. (Stephens, 3/30)

California Healthline: Anthem-Cigna Merger Proposal Takes a Grilling
State insurance commissioner Dave Jones continued to make his skepticism clear regarding Anthem Inc.’s proposed $54.2 billion acquisition of Cigna Corp. during a hearing here on Tuesday. Company executives faced Jones and a panel of physicians and consumer advocates who questioned the benefits the companies say the acquisition will bring. The Department of Insurance hearing took a more pressing tone than a related hearing held by the Department of Managed Health Care earlier this month. (Ibarra, 3/30)

The Washington Post: A Doctor Removed the Wrong Ovary, and Other Nightmare Tales from California Licensing Records
The main job of state medical boards is to license doctors and to investigate complaints. But their findings are often difficult for the average consumer to access, meaning that many Americans are none the wiser that the doctor they may be visiting is on probation for egregious errors or ethics violations. In a report published Tuesday, Consumer Reports took a deep dive into the list of California doctors on probation — but still practicing — and what they found is unsettling. (Cha, 3/29)

The Associated Press: Industry Urges California Governor to Veto Anti-Vaping Bill
The fast-growing vaping industry promoted itself Tuesday as a partner - not a scourge - in the effort to reduce smoking, as representatives urged California Gov. Jerry Brown to veto a bill that treats the products like tobacco. The bill, one of six anti-smoking measures awaiting action by the Democratic governor, would subject electronic cigarettes to the same restrictions as traditional cigarettes, including workplace smoking bans. (Cooper, 3/29)

CAPITOL HILL WATCH

The Washington Post: Obama Anti-Heroin Strategy Shifts Focus to Treatment from Arrests
President Obama mounted his bully pulpit Tuesday in an attempt to change the focus on heroin and opioid addiction from a criminal problem to a health issue. It would be a major shift in emphasis if he succeeds. “The only way that we reduce demand is if we’re providing treatment and thinking about this as a public health problem and not just a criminal problem,” he said to cheers and applause. Obama also acknowledged that more attention is being paid to addiction as a health issue now that it is seen as a growing threat to white communities, instead of primarily a low-income black and brown police matter. (Davidson, 3/29)
HEALTH LAW ISSUES AND IMPLEMENTATION

The Washington Post: They're Sicker, Plus ACA Enrollees Cost More in Care, Major Insurer Finds
Medical costs for individuals who obtained coverage through the ACA’s insurance exchanges were, on average, 22 percent higher than those with employer-based coverage in 2015, according to the association. ... Under the law, no one can be denied coverage because of a pre-existing medical condition. Researchers and policy experts have always predicted that new enrollees during the first few years would include many older, sicker consumers who previously lacked insurance. (Sun, 3/30)

PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION

The Sacramento Business Journal: VSP Hits 1 Million Mark in Charity Eye-Care Program
Rancho Cordova-based VSP Global said Monday it has now served 1 million people with a program to provide free eye exams and glasses. Since 1997 the company has invested about $175 million in its Eyes of Hope charity initiative. The company says it plans to serve a million more people in the next four years. (Anderson, 3/30)

Kaiser Health News: Pregnant and Addicted: The Tough Road to a Healthy Family
Amanda Hensley started abusing prescription painkillers when she was just a teenager. For years, she managed to function and hold down jobs. She even quit opioids for a while when she was pregnant with her now 4-year-old son. But she relapsed. Hensley says she preferred drugs like Percocet and morphine, but opted for heroin when short on cash. By the time she discovered she was pregnant last year, she couldn't quit. (Tribble, 3/30)

NPR: Big Financial Costs are Part of Alzheimer’s Toll on Families
First, Alzheimer's takes a person's memory. Then it takes their family's money. That's the central finding of a report published Wednesday by the Alzheimer's Association on the financial burden friends and families bear when they care for someone with dementia. "What we found was really startling," says Beth Kallmyer, vice president of constituent services for the organization. "The cost of paying for care was putting people in a situation where they had to make really difficult choices around basic necessities — things like food, medical care, transportation.” (Hamilton, 3/30)

MARKETPLACE

The Associated Press: Makers of Pricey Prostate Cancer Drug Xtandi are Targeted by Congress
In a letter to the heads of the Department of Health and Human Services and the National Institutes of Health, Reps. Lloyd Doggett (D-Texas) and Peter Welch (D-Vt.) and Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) urged the agencies to step in to cut prices for Xtandi, saying it costs four times as much in the U.S. as in some other developed countries. They are asking for public hearings on the drug. The lawmakers want the NIH to consider overriding Xtandi's patent, which guarantees Medivation and Astellas exclusive sales for a decade or more. Overriding the patent would allow for Xtandi's price to be reduced. (3/29)
WOMEN’S HEALTH

Kaiser Health News: Supreme Court Asks for More Information in Birth Control Case
As for the potential compromise, the justices asked the lawyers specifically if the religious organizations might inform their insurers when initially contracting for insurance that they do not wish to offer contraceptive coverage. At that point, the insurance company, “aware that petitioners are not providing certain contraceptive coverage on religious grounds — would separately notify petitioners’ employees that the insurance company will provide cost-free contraceptive coverage, and that such coverage is not paid for by petitioners and is not provided through petitioners’ health plan.” (Rovner, 3/29)

EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

USA Today: Don’t Let Lobbyists Kill Telemedicine
Proponents argue that the technology is unsafe, irresponsible, and hurts the business of licensed professionals. But by this logic, the home thermometer, too, is a dangerous tool in the hands of untrained people. Thermometers inserted, timed, and read by doctors or nurses are safer, more accurate, and more responsible. If you are sick enough to need to take your temperature, you are sick enough that you must see a doctor or at least a nurse. The same alarmists might worry that the more inexpensive thermometers have become, the more people have used them. This, after all, is how dangerous technologies spread. More importantly, allowing millions of people to take their own temperatures cuts into the fees that doctors could charge if only the home thermometer could be banned and the existing supply confiscated. (Newt Gingrich, 3/30)

Bloomberg: Curing Cancer is Within Reach
One of the most frightening words a patient can hear from a doctor is “cancer.” We know it from the experience of our families and friends, and the millions of Americans who hear it directly from their doctors each year. In President Barack Obama’s final State of the Union address, he compared the effort required to eradicate cancer to a “moonshot,” summoning the American ingenuity and scientific pursuits that sent humankind to the moon. We believe that it’s time for a full and complete national commitment to rid the world of this disease, because the truth is that ending cancer as we know it is finally within our grasp. (Michael R. Bloomberg and Joe Biden, 3/30)
CALIFORNIA WATCH

**California Healthline: California Senate Committee Approves End-of-Life Help Line**
Legislation that would require California to establish an information line to answer the public’s questions about end-of-life options received approval in a Senate committee on Wednesday despite critics’ concerns that the bill could be mistaken for a suicide hotline. SB 1002, authored by Sen. Bill Monning, D-Carmel, would make a toll-free number available on the state Department of Public Health’s website. The idea, according to Monning, is to make accurate information easily accessible to terminally ill patients, their families and doctors. These patients may be considering ways to end their lives under a new aid-in-dying law. (Ibarra, 3/31)

CAPITOL HILL WATCH

**Kaiser Health News: President’s Task Force Aims to Help End Discrimination in Mental Health Coverage**
Tucked in remarks the president made Tuesday on the opioid epidemic was his announcement of a new task force on mental health parity — aimed at ensuring that people with mental illnesses and substance abuse problems don’t face discrimination in the health care system. Despite a landmark 2008 law intended to do just that, enforcement has been paltry, and advocates say discrimination has continued. (Gold, 3/31)

**Bloomberg: CMS Releases Final Medicaid Mental Health Parity Rule**
Millions of beneficiaries who receive services through Medicaid managed care organizations, Medicaid alternative benefit plans or CHIP must be provided access to the same mental health and substance use disorder benefits and protections of private plans under a final rule released March 29 by the CMS. Medicaid is the single largest payer for mental health services in the U.S. and is increasingly playing a larger role in the reimbursement of substance use disorder services. (Weixel, 3/30)

**The Washington Post: The FDA Just Made the Abortion Pill Easier to Get**
In practice, the situation will not change for most of those seeking abortions, as doctors for years have been diverging from the old FDA protocol on the basis of new research — a common practice known as prescribing a drug “off-label.” But a handful of states have laws requiring abortion providers to adhere at least in part to the FDA-approved label, leading some providers to all but abandon the use of the abortion pill. (Somashekhar and McGinley, 3/30)

A special House committee empaneled to investigate fetal tissue research issued subpoenas on Wednesday to eight medical organizations as part of an investigation that has led to charges of intimidation. “The Select Investigative Panel is working in a thoughtful and thorough manner to find the facts about what exactly is going on at these abortion businesses and procurement organizations,” said Representative Marsha Blackburn, a Republican from Tennessee who leads the House Select Investigative Panel on Infant Lives. “Unfortunately, some of these organizations have so redacted documents — even after being subpoenaed — that it is impossible for us to get the complete picture of what is actually going on.” (Harris, 3/30)
CAMPAIGN 2016

Reuters: Trump Sounds Off On Abortion; Criticism Comes from All Sides
Trump has won support from Republican voters for selling himself as a Washington outsider. But the New York real estate tycoon, who once supported abortion access, has come under pressure from conservatives to prove he is truly one of them. At the same time, he has drawn criticism for comments that offended women and minority groups. "Of course, women shouldn't be punished," rival Republican candidate John Kasich said on Wednesday, saying he opposed abortion except in specific cases such as rape. U.S. Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, the third candidate for the Republican nomination for the Nov. 8 election, said Trump had not thought through the issue. (Stephenson, 3/30)

The Hill: Kasich: GOP Vow to Repeal ObamaCare ‘A Stupid Promise’
Gov. John Kasich (R-Ohio) says the GOP erred by pledging it would repeal ObamaCare during the 2014 midterm elections. "You've been supporting conservative candidates, [and] in 2014 they told you that they were going to repeal ObamaCare," he said on "The Jay Weber Show," as first reported by BuzzFeed. "Do you realize that that's just a big joke?" the GOP presidential candidate asked. "It got all these conservatives stirred up and angry because they didn't keep their word. I mean, what a stupid promise. The base of the party is furious because you didn't repeal ObamaCare. How are you going to repeal ObamaCare when Obama's president?" (Hensch, 3/30)

PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Kaiser Health News: A Crisis with Little Data: States Begin to Count Drug-Dependent Babies
How do fix a problem if you don't know its size? Many states — including some that have been hardest hit by the opioid crisis — don't know how many of their youngest residents each year are born physically dependent on those drugs. ... To make good decisions, health officials need basic information: Which infants are affected? How many, where, and why? (Allen, 3/31)

NPR: New Source of Transplant Organs for Patients with HIV: Others with HIV
When a Connecticut woman who was HIV-positive died earlier this month, her family decided to donate her organs to others who needed them. Doctors in Maryland announced Wednesday that they performed two landmark, successful surgeries with her kidney and liver — transplanting the organs to HIV-positive patients. This is a big deal, because there continues to be an overall shortage of organs available for transplant, and people living with HIV have an increased risk of kidney and liver failure. (Bichell, 3/31)

The Associated Press: Medical Community is Fighting a New Germ: Celebrities
When celebrity and science collide, harmful side effects may occur. The latest case happened last weekend when the Tribeca Film Festival pulled a documentary from its program by a discredited former doctor whose research into the connection between vaccines and autism has been debunked. After festival co-founder Robert De Niro initially defended the film's inclusion, Tribeca -- facing an uproar from doctors and experts -- pulled it. ... The episode is only the latest instance of the medical community being forced to combat the influence of a celebrity promoting questionable science. It has particularly bedeviled questions over vaccinations, beginning with the anti-vaccination advocacy of TV personality Jenny McCarthy. (Coyle, 3/30)
STAT: FDA Allows New Test to Screen Blood Donations for Zika Virus
The Food and Drug Administration on Wednesday endorsed the first test to screen blood donations for the Zika virus. The screening test still has investigational status, meaning it does not have final approval. But FDA spokeswoman Tara Goodin said the agency has vetted the product and is confident it will work. (Kaplan, 3/30)

MARKETPLACE

Reuters: Decline in Financial Settlements with U.S. Big Pharma: Report
The amount of money big U.S. pharmaceutical manufacturers have paid to settle charges for violating federal health care laws has declined sharply in recent years, prompting a non-profit watchdog group to call for an increase in enforcement efforts. In a new analysis that chronicles 25 years worth of pharmaceutical industry settlements and court judgments, the group, known as Public Citizen, found that just $2.4 billion in federal financial penalties were recovered from 2014 to 2015 - a figure that is less than one third of the $8.7 billion recovered from 2012 to 2013. (Lynch, 3/31)

HEALTH IT

Hospitals throughout MedStar Health’s network continued to face problems with their online systems Wednesday, two days after a cyberattack crippled the health-care giant’s email and patient records databases. “Our electronic medical records system is working,” spokeswoman Ann Nickels said. “Individual work stations may not be working.” MedStar also issued a statement Wednesday saying that “the three main clinical information systems supporting patient care are moving to full restoration, and enhanced functionality continues to be added to other systems.” (Cox, 3/30)

EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

Los Angeles Times: New Obamacare Surprise: New Customers Look Just Like Average Americans
Blue Cross/Blue Shield, which is the largest player in the individual exchange market under the Affordable Care Act, has taken a close look at its enrolled population since the exchanges opened for business. For some reason the Blues seem to be surprised at this finding: Members who enrolled in 2014 and 2015 “have higher rates of certain diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, depression, coronary artery disease, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and Hepatitis C than individuals who already had BCBS individual coverage….received significantly more medical services in their first year of coverage, on average..., (and) used more medical services across all sites of care.” (Michael Hiltzik, 3/30)

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Certain news organizations are protected via a paywall requiring the purchase of a subscription to view their content.
California Healthline: Medi-Cal Expands to Immigrant Children. Here’s How it Works.
In a few months, California will begin providing full Medi-Cal coverage to all low-income children — regardless of their immigration status. Depending on whom you ask, anywhere from 170,000 to 250,000 children who live in California and are in the country illegally will qualify. If you think your child will, or know a parent whose child will, state officials and health care advocates have a simple message for you: Take action now. (Bazar, 4/1)

California Healthline: Smoking-Age Bills Aim to Keep Youngsters Away From Tobacco (and Vapors)
If the governor signs a bill that was approved by the legislature March 3, Jake’s age will become even more problematic for his tobacco habit — it would raise the legal smoking age from 18 to 21. And that, said University of California, San Francisco tobacco policy researcher Rachel Barry, is one of the likely consequences of moving the age up to 21. It will mean that the younger smokers will find it much harder to score their smokes. (Gorn, 4/1)

KPCC: California Considers a Free Hotline — for Assisted Suicide
A measure that would provide a government-operated toll-free telephone line for consumers and health providers seeking information about California’s physician-assisted suicide law passed its first legislative hurdle Wednesday. The State Senate Health Committee voted 7-2 in favor of the measure, which now moves to the Senate Appropriations Committee. Sen. Bill Monning (D-Carmel) introduced the bill, SB 1002, last month. It would require the California Department of Public Health to establish and operate the toll-free line during regular business hours. The controversial assisted suicide law, which takes effect on June 9, will allow some terminally ill patients to ask their doctors to provide them with lethal medication. (O’Neill, 3/30)

CAMPAIGN 2016

The New York Times: Donald Trump Acknowledges Misstep on Abortion Question
Donald J. Trump on Thursday allowed that he might have misspoken on the topic of abortion when he told the MSNBC host Chris Matthews that women who have abortions should face some form of punishment if the procedure is banned. But he insisted the media attention to a misstep — amid the volume of questions he answers — gets outsize attention. “If you answer one question inartfully or incorrectly in some form, or you misunderstood it or you misspoke, it ends up being a big story,” he said. “That doesn’t happen with other people.” (Haberman, 3/31)

HEALTH LAW ISSUES AND IMPLEMENTATION

USA Today: Insurers Cut Commissions to Restrict When and What Plans People Buy
Insurers increasingly are dropping agents’ commissions to discourage the sale of the Affordable Care Act plans they’re losing the most money on, especially when the consumers are more likely to be sick. The moves by nearly every major insurer over the last few months are often focused on times of the year and plans that attract the sickest people and starting to prompt action by state officials and legislators. Some, including the head of California’s state insurance exchange, say federal regulators should help assure consumers get the help and plans they need, especially during special enrollment periods when they lose jobs, move or have babies. (O’Donnell, 3/31)
PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION

NPR: Zika is Linked to Microcephaly, Health Agencies Confirm
The World Health Organization says there is now scientific consensus that the Zika virus is connected with microcephaly — a condition in which babies are born with very small heads and brain damage. Scientists have been working for months to confirm a link between Zika and microcephaly, ever since Brazil reported a startling increase in cases last fall. Zika infection during pregnancy appears to increase the risk for several types of birth defects and miscarriages, a recent study found. And scientists have found the virus in the brains of affected babies. (Doucleff, 3/31)

MARKETPLACE

Reuters: Drug Shortages Prompt Question: Are Some Medicines Too Cheap?
Philip Aubrey buys medicines for British government-funded hospitals across London, capital of the world's fifth-largest economy, but last year he struggled to secure supplies of a basic AIDS drug. He is not alone. Shortages of essential drugs, mostly generic medicines whose patents have long expired, are becoming increasingly frequent globally, prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) to suggest minimum prices may be needed to keep some products on the market. (4/1)

Kaiser Health News: Workers’ Desire Grows for Wage Increases Over Health Benefits
More wages, less health insurance. In a recent survey, one in five people with employer-based coverage said they would opt for fewer health benefits if they could get a bump in their wages. That’s double the percentage who said they would make that choice in 2012. “I do these surveys all the time, and it’s rare where you see things change that quickly,” said Paul Fronstin, director of the health research and education program at the Employee Benefit Research Institute, which conducted the survey of 1,500 workers with Greenwald & Associates. (Andrews, 4/1)

Bloomberg: Theranos Inspection Report Details Quality-Control Failures
The document also includes Theranos’s plans for corrections, saying the new lab director, Kingshuk Das, has implemented extensive new procedures to improve the facility’s operations. “The lab directors during the period covered by the survey no longer hold any position with the lab,” Theranos wrote in the document. … “We have no reason to believe that the issues raised by CMS have affected patients health,” company spokeswoman Brooke Buchanan said Thursday in an e-mail. “We’ve made mistakes in the past in the Newark, CA lab, but when the company was made aware of the deficiencies we have dedicated every resource to remedy those failures.” (Chen and Tracer, 3/31)

HEALTH IT

Reuters: U.S., Canada Issue Joint Alert on ‘Ransomware’ After Hospital Attacks
The United States and Canada on Thursday issued a rare joint cyber alert, warning against a recent surge in extortion attacks that infect computers with viruses known as "ransomware," which encrypt data and demand payments for it to be unlocked. The warning follows reports from several private security firms that they expect the crisis to worsen, because hackers are getting more sophisticated and few businesses have adopted proper security measures to thwart such attacks. (Finkle, 3/31)
EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

The Washington Post: The Worst Stereotype of the GOP is Coming to Life in the Form of Donald Trump
This campaign season has offered an unexpected form of reality television entertainment: Watching the light of discovery and calculation in Donald Trump’s eyes when he is presented with difficult policy issues, apparently for the very first time. Abortion is the current case in point. In the late 1990s, Trump supported the legality of partial-birth abortion. For a few hours on Wednesday, he endorsed criminal sanctions against women who have abortions. (Michael Gerson, 3/31)