CALIFORNIA WATCH

California Healthline: For California's Smallest Businesses, Obamacare Opened the Door
Under Republican-led plans to repeal the ACA, hundreds of thousands of self-employed people in California are at risk of losing their ability to buy affordable insurance. Some business owners welcome the rollback of the law, but the smallest of California businesses — entrepreneurs and contract workers who buy insurance on their own through Covered California — have the most to lose under a repeal. That worries small business advocates who favor the ACA. They say putting health care coverage out of reach of the self-employed could threaten Americans’ entrepreneurial spirit and burden people who create jobs and take on financial risk. (Bartolone, 2/13)

Stat: California's Criminal Penalties for HIV Transmission could be Rolled Back
The state legislature decided in 1988 that somebody who donated blood while knowingly HIV-positive could be punished with up to six years in prison. Ten years later, it became a felony to have unprotected sex with the intent of transmitting HIV to a partner. Now, in 2017, a group of Democratic state lawmakers say times have changed — not that those behaviors shouldn’t be illegal, but that HIV/AIDS shouldn’t be singled out. Under California’s newly introduced Senate Bill 239, intentionally transmitting any infectious or communicable disease, including HIV, would be a misdemeanor, not a felony. (Facher, 2/13)

Ventura County Star: County Millennials Dominate New Heroin Stats
Nearly half of the heroin-triggered emergency room visits by Ventura County residents over nine months last year involved millennials ages 20 to 29, according to new state data. As of Sept. 30, 92 Ventura County residents had been treated and released in emergency rooms for conditions caused by heroin poisoning, according to records requested by The Star from the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development. (Kisken, 2/11)

California Healthline: California Regulator Slams Health Insurers over Faulty Doctor Lists
California’s biggest health insurers reported inaccurate information to the state on which doctors are in their networks, offering conflicting lists that differed by several thousand physicians. Shelley Rouillard, director of the California Department of Managed Health Care, said 36 of 40 health insurers she reviewed could face fines for failing to submit accurate data or comply with state rules. (Terhune, 2/10)

ADMINISTRATION NEWS

Modern Healthcare: New HHS Secretary Tom Price Faces a Crushing Inbox
Newly confirmed HHS Secretary Tom Price likely will spend his first few days focusing on efforts to stabilize the individual health insurance market as Republicans work to repeal and replace the ACA. The former congressman from Georgia was approved on a 52-47 vote. (Meyer and Dickson, 2/11)

HEALTH LAW

The New York Times: Republicans, Aiming to Kill Health Law, also Work to Shore it Up
After denouncing the ACA as an abomination for seven years, Republicans in Congress, working with the Trump administration, are urgently seeking ways to shore up health insurance marketplaces created by the law. While President Trump said as a candidate that “Obamacare is certain to collapse of its own weight,” Republicans fear such an outcome because, now that the fate of the health law is in their hands, they could be blamed by consumers and Democrats. (Pear, 2/10)
The Washington Post: Swarming Crowds and Hostile Questions are the New Normal at GOP Town Halls
Republicans in deep-red congressional districts spent the week navigating massive crowds and hostile questions at their town hall meetings — an early indication of how progressive opposition movements are mobilizing against the agenda of the GOP and President Trump. Angry constituents swarmed events held by Reps. Jason Chaffetz (Utah), Diane Black (Tenn.), Justin Amash (Mich.) and Tom McClintock (Calif.). They filled the rooms that had been reserved for them; in Utah and Tennessee, scores of activists were locked out. Voters pressed members of Congress on their plans to repeal the Affordable Care Act, on the still-controversial confirmation of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and even on a low-profile vote to disband an election commission created after 2000. (Snell, Schwartzman, Friess and Weigel, 2/10)

PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Kaiser Health News: Death Doesn’t Have to be So Scary
Most people prefer not to think about death, much less plan for it. In a tech-crazed world, where time is commonly measured in 140 characters and 6-second sound bites, life would appear to be dissected into so many bite-sized morsels that discussion of death doesn’t even seem to fit into the equation. “Everybody has a fear of death, no matter what culture, religion or country they come from,” said Kelvin Chin, author of “Overcoming the Fear of Death” and founder of the Overcoming the Fear of Death Foundation and the non-profit turningwithin.org. “Fear is simply an emotion caused by the anticipation of unhappiness.” (Horovitz, 2/13)

NPR: Depression Hits Teen Girls Especially Hard, and High Social Media Use Doesn’t Help
It's tough to be a teenager. Hormones kick in, peer pressures escalate and academic expectations loom large. Kids become more aware of their environment in the teen years — down the block and online. The whole mix of changes can increase stress, anxiety and the risk of depression among all teens, research has long shown. But a recent study published in the journal Pediatrics suggests many more teenage girls in the U.S. may be experiencing major depressive episodes at this age than boys. (Neighmond, 2/13)

Jernica Quiñones, a mother of five, was the first parent in New Jersey to get her free baby box — a portable, low-tech bassinet made of laminated cardboard. But first, she had to take an online course about safe sleeping practices, which experts say can sharply reduce the chances of sudden infant death syndrome. “Basically, you want to have the baby on the mattress, and that’s it,” she said after watching a 20-minute series of videos. (Foderao, 2/12)

The New York Times: Karen Pence Picks a Cause, and Art Therapists Feel Angst
Although art therapy is offered by a number of established medical centers, many Americans don’t know much about it. Art therapy is a form of psychotherapy where mental health professionals use art materials to help patients explore feelings that may not be easy to express in words. Almost overnight, the field has attracted new attention because of a connection with the Trump administration. On Inauguration Day, Karen Pence, the second lady, announced on the newly revamped White House website that she wants to shine a “spotlight on the mental health profession of art therapy.” (Saint Louis, 2/10)
WOMEN’S HEALTH

Reuters: Calls for Protests for and Against Planned Parenthood
Anti-abortion groups called for demonstrations at more than 200 Planned Parenthood locations throughout the United States on Saturday to urge Congress and President Trump to strip the women's health provider of federal funding. Supporters of Planned Parenthood in turn organized 150 counterdemonstrations outside politicians’ offices and government buildings. (2/11)

PHARMACEUTICALS

The Washington Post: An Old Drug Gets a New Price to Fight a Rare Disease: $89,000 a Year
An old steroid treatment, long available outside the United States, received approval this week for a rare disease that afflicts about 15,000 Americans. Though not previously approved in the United States, the drug, deflazacort, has for years been available to patients suffering from the devastating and fatal disease Duchenne muscular dystrophy; families can import it from abroad for about $1,200 per year on average. The new list price for the drug? $89,000 a year. (Johnson, 2/10)

Kaiser Health News: Grassley Launches Inquiry into Orphan Drugs after KHN Investigation
Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, has opened an inquiry into potential abuses of the Orphan Drug Act that may have contributed to high prices on commonly used drugs. In a statement, Grassley said the inquiry is “based on reporting from Kaiser Health News” and strong consumer concern about high drug prices. (Tribble, 2/10)

EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

Los Angeles Times: With Billions at Stake, a Federal Judge Just Nullified the GOP’s Most Cynical Attack on Obamacare
Moda Health, a small Oregon health insurer, just won a $214-million judgment against the federal government. Normally that wouldn’t be worth reporting, except that in awarding Moda the money, the federal judge in the case dismantled the most cynical attack on the Affordable Care Act that Congressional Republicans had devised. The issue was the ACA’s risk corridor program, which was devised to shelter insurers from unexpected losses in covering ACA customers from 2014 through 2016. To encourage insurers to enter an entirely novel market, the program aimed to balance risks by taking profits from insurers that turned out to be unexpectedly profitable and use the funds to cushion others’ losses. (Michael Hiltzik, 2/10)
California Healthline: Rest of the U.S. could Learn 'A Great Deal' from Covered California, Study Says
Researchers find that the state's exchange has succeeded by fostering competition, with a large number of insurers in the mix, aggressively negotiating on premiums and setting conditions for health plan participation. (O'Neill, 2/14)

Ventura County Star: Thousand Oaks Heart Effort Featured in National Program
A Thousand Oaks free clinic effort driven by 40 high school students will be featured Thursday in a national heart program in Delaware. Thousand Oaks High School graduate Alejandra Mena, 18, is journeying to Wilmington, Delaware, to talk about a Corazones Sanos, or Healthy Hearts, program aimed at low-income people and driven by high school students involved with the Westminster Free Clinic in Thousand Oaks. Lisa Safaeinili, the clinic's executive director, and Espy Gonzalez, the clinic's case manager, will also talk about successes of the 2-year-old heart program in changing the way people eat, exercise and deal with the stresses that can affect their health. (Kisken, 2/13)

Reuters: California Lawmaker Makes Push for Health Warning Labels on Soda
A California state senator is taking another stab at introducing a law that would require sugary drink manufacturers to put a warning label on their products, the latest effort in the "War on Sugar." Officials and public health advocates have heightened their criticism of sugar as a key contributor to health epidemics like obesity and diabetes, and California has become a major battleground in the fight against what they say is excessive sugar consumption. (Prentice, 2/13)

Sacramento Bee: Abortion Rates Drop in California, Amid Federal Debate on Planned Parenthood, Reproductive Rights
Abortion rates are at an all-time low in California, and both sides of the political aisle are taking credit. New abortion data from the Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit organization that studies reproductive health, shows that fewer women than ever are obtaining abortions nationwide. Abortion opponents call it proof that their efforts to sway women away from the procedure are working, while abortion rights advocates point to increased sexual education and contraceptive use as drivers of the decline. (Caiola and Reese, 2/13)

Modern Healthcare: Why High-Risk Pools Won't Crack the Pre-Existing Condition Dilemma
Some Republican leaders are promoting state high-risk pools as an alternative to the Affordable Care Act's popular provision requiring health plans to accept consumers regardless of pre-existing medical conditions. They cite Wisconsin's pre-ACA pool, the Health Insurance Risk-Sharing Plan, as a model. But a Wisconsin insurance official recently cautioned a House panel that high-risk pools need a stable funding source and are not a solution for every state. Other experts say state high-risk pools generally were a policy failure across the country, and making them work properly would require a large amount of taxpayer funding. (Meyer, 2/13)
Politico: Conservatives Balking at GOP Leadership's Obamacare Plans
House conservatives — anxious that the GOP’s effort to end Obamacare is getting bogged down in the fight over what a replacement should look like — are plotting a major push to repeal the law immediately without simultaneously approving an alternative. The House Freedom Caucus and a number of Republican Study Committee members this week will urge Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) and his lieutenants to forego their plan to add replacement provisions to a repeal bill, dubbed “repeal-plus.” Instead, they want to approve the same standalone repeal bill that Congress sent to President Barack Obama in 2016. (Bade, 2/13)

ADMINISTRATION NEWS

USA Today: Senate Confirms David Shulkin as Veterans Affairs Secretary
The Senate unanimously confirmed Trump nominee David Shulkin to be secretary of Veterans Affairs Monday night. Shulkin, the lone holdover from the Obama administration among President Trump’s Cabinet picks, has been the VA undersecretary for health since July 2015 and has not drawn the harsh opposition from Democrats that other Trump nominees have faced. (Slack, 2/13)

HEALTH LAW

Kaiser Health News: A Deep Dive into 4 GOP Talking Points on Health Care
Republicans leaders have a lengthy list of talking points about the shortcomings of the health law. Shortly before his inauguration last month, President Donald Trump said that it “is a complete and total disaster. It’s imploding as we sit.” And they can point to a host of issues, including premium increases averaging more than 20 percent this year, a drop in the number of insurers competing on the Affordable Care Act marketplaces and rising consumer discontent with high deductibles and limited doctor networks. Yet a careful analysis of some of the GOP’s talking points show a much more nuanced situation and suggest that the political fights over the law may have contributed to some of its problems. (Rovner, 2/14)

McClatchy: Trump Urged to Reject “Cadillac Tax” and Retain Employee Tax Break
Twenty-seven employer groups asked the Trump administration on Monday to reject calls to replace the Affordable Care Act’s “Cadillac Tax” on high-cost health benefits with a plan that caps the individual tax exclusion for job-based health coverage. Premiums paid by employees for job-based health insurance aren’t taxed as income, which reduces the amount of payroll taxes and income taxes owed by workers. (Pugh, 2/13)

Forbes: As Tom Price Takes Over HHS, Studies Back Accountable Care Organizations
Accountable care organizations are getting favorable reviews as a way to reduce costs and improve health quality for Medicaid and Medicare patients in two new studies out this week in JAMA Internal Medicine. The studies come as Dr. Tom Price, a conservative Georgia Congressman, begins his first week on the job as U.S. Secretary and Health and Human Services .... Price has spoken somewhat favorably about value-based care models but it’s unclear just how committed he will be to the move away from fee-for-service medicine. (Japsen, 2/13)
MARKETPLACE

Reuters: Aetna, Humana Walk Away from $34 Billion Deal after Court Ruling
After the Jan. 23 court ruling, Aetna and Humana had said they were weighing whether to appeal the decision and extend their agreement, which was set to expire on Feb. 15. Aetna and Humana announced the deal in July 2015, just a few weeks before Anthem Inc and Cigna Corp said they would also combine. A year later, the U.S. Justice Department sued to block both transactions and won, derailing what would have been a massive industry consolidation to three insurers from five. (Humer, 2/14)

PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Dr. James Weinstein, a back pain specialist and chief executive of Dartmouth-Hitchcock Health System, has some advice for most people with lower back pain: Take two aspirin and don't call me. (Kolata, 2/13)

The New York Times: Sharp Rise Reported in Older Americans’ Use of Multiple Psychotropic Drugs
The number of retirement-age Americans taking at least three psychiatric drugs more than doubled between 2004 and 2013, even though almost half of them had no mental health diagnosis on record. The new analysis, based on data from doctors’ office visits, suggests that inappropriate prescribing to older people is more common than previously thought. Office visits are a close, if not exact, estimate of underlying patient numbers. The paper appears in the journal JAMA Internal Medicine. (Carey, 2/13)

PHARMACEUTICALS

Kaiser Health News: Drugmaker Marathon ‘Pausing’ Delivery of $89,000-a-Year Muscular Dystrophy Drug
In a surprise move Monday, Marathon Pharmaceuticals told patient advocates that it would “pause” the launch of its drug Emflaza because of pricing concerns expressed by patients and advocacy groups. The drugmaker had announced an $89,000 annual price tag for its newly approved drug last week but patients and lawmakers immediately cried foul. (Tribble and Lupkin, 2/13)

EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

The Washington Post: Obamacare Replacement: It's Complicated
Speaker of the House Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) seems to reiterate weekly that the GOP has a plan to replace the ACA. To be honest (why isn’t he?), his “A Better Way” plan provided a rough outline of healthcare reform, but there are a zillion details to be determined. In addition, thanks to President Trump, the bar for a replacement has risen considerably since Ryan presented his plan. It must “have insurance for everybody,” be cheaper, be more flexible and offer better care. Oh, and Republicans promise no tax increases to pay for it. So far the Republicans have yet to converge on any plan. (Jennifer Rubin, 2/13)
California Healthline: ER Visits Linked to Falls Spike among California Seniors
State data show a rise of nearly 40 percent in fall-related visits from 2010 to 2015, a period in which the elderly population grew about 21 percent. (Gorman, 2/15)

San Jose Mercury News: Obamacare: California's Uninsured Rate Drops to New Record Low
The Affordable Care Act, the same law that President Donald Trump and the Republican majority Congress are intent on replacing, has helped California reduce its uninsured rate to a record low of 7.1 percent. That's almost 10 percentage points less than in 2013, when 17 percent of Californians were uninsured and just before the health care law took full effect, according to a new survey released Tuesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (Seipel, 2/14)

Los Angeles Times: County Health Officials Investigate Death of Santa Monica High Student Amid Norovirus Concerns
The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health is investigating the death of an 18-year-old Santa Monica High School student. Kelly Cano, a senior, died Saturday. She is the second student that the high school has lost this school year. Sophomore Vanai Jelks, 15, died in October. (Kohli, Karlamangla and Etehad, 2/14)

CAPITOL HILL WATCH

Kaiser Health News: Influence of GOP Doctors Caucus Grows as Congress Looks to Replace Health Law
The confirmation of Tom Price, the orthopedic surgeon-turned-Georgia congressman, as secretary of Health and Human Services represents the latest victory in the ascendancy of a little-known but powerful group of conservative physicians in Congress he belongs to — the GOP Doctors Caucus. During the Obama administration, the caucus regularly sought to overturn the ACA, and it's now expected to play a major role determining the Trump administration's plans for replacement. (Galewitz, 2/15)

The Hill: Key Republican: GOP Eyeing Major Change to Medicaid in ObamaCare Bill
A top House Republican on healthcare said Tuesday that lawmakers are looking to dramatically restructure Medicaid as part of an ObamaCare repeal bill. Rep. Brett Guthrie (R-Ky.), the vice chairman of the House Energy and Commerce health subcommittee, told reporters that Republicans are looking to include an idea known as "per capita caps" for Medicaid in the fast-track reconciliation bill used to repeal ObamaCare. The comments suggest that Republicans are dealing not just with ObamaCare, but also with restructuring Medicaid as part of their repeal efforts, adding another level of complication. (Sullivan, 2/14)

Stat: Bipartisan Bill Aims to Choke Off Opioid Shipments into US
Aiming to choke off shipments of powerful synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, a bipartisan group of lawmakers is introducing legislation on Tuesday to require more information on packages mailed into the US. The bill, sponsored in the Senate by Republicans Rob Portman and Marco Rubio along with Democrats Amy Klobuchar and Maggie Hassan, was introduced late last Congress but never moved. A similar bill is expected to be introduced in the House by Representatives Pat Tiberi, a Republican, and Richard Neal, a Democrat. (Scott, 2/14)
HEALTH LAW

Modern Healthcare: Actuaries Offer Competing Proposals for Reforming the Insurance Market
Congressional Republicans working on rewriting rules for the struggling individual insurance market might want to study five different reform proposals chosen as finalists in a national competition among actuarial professionals. (Meyer, 2/15)

MARKETPLACE

The New York Times: Humana Plans to Pull Out of Obamacare’s Insurance Exchanges
Humana announced on Tuesday that it would no longer offer health insurance coverage in the state marketplaces created under the federal health care law, becoming the first major insurer to cast a no-confidence vote over selling individual plans on the public exchanges for 2018. President Trump immediately seized on the company’s decision as evidence that the Affordable Care Act needed to be repealed and replaced. “Obamacare continues to fail,” he said on Twitter. (Abelson, 2/14)

The Associated Press: 2 Big Insurance Breakups on Valentine’s Day
It was a rough day for the already-roiled U.S. health insurance market: One giant merger was abandoned, another is threatened by infighting, and a major insurer announced it will stop selling coverage on public exchanges in 11 states. Both merger deals had already been rejected by federal regulators and judges, but the companies were considering appeals to those decisions. Now they both appear to be off. (Murphy, 2/14)

PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION

The Washington Post: Ethicists Advise Caution in Applying CRISPR Gene Editing to Humans
Ethicists have been working overtime to figure out how to handle CRISPR, the revolutionary gene-editing technique that could potentially prevent congenital diseases but could also be used for cosmetic enhancements and lead to permanent, heritable changes in the human species. The latest iteration of this ongoing CRISPR debate is a report published Tuesday by the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Medicine. The report, a series of guidelines written by 22 experts from multiple countries and a variety of academic specialties, presents a kind of flashing red light for CRISPR. (Achenbach, 2/14)

The Washington Post: CDC Reports More Progress Against HIV, but Gay Latinos Contracted More Infections
The government reported more evidence of progress against HIV on Tuesday, citing an 18 percent decline in the number of U.S. infections between 2008 and 2014 and even sharper drops among heterosexuals and people who inject drugs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said that the estimated number of infections fell from 45,700 in 2008 to 37,600 in 2014, after remaining at roughly the same level for more than a decade. Heterosexuals saw a 36 percent decline in HIV diagnoses during the same period, and intravenous-drug users experienced a 56 percent drop despite a burgeoning opioid epidemic. (Bernstein, 2/14)
NPR: Cold Caps Reduce Hair Loss from Chemotherapy
It's no surprise that most women with breast cancer consider hair loss one of the most traumatic aspects of chemotherapy. That has led to a big market for cooling caps, which are purported to limit hair loss. But cooling caps haven't been extensively studied in the U.S., and women's experiences with the caps have been hit or miss. And just one cooling cap, the DigniCap, is approved by the Food and Drug Administration. (Neighmond, 2/14)

WOMEN'S HEALTH

USA Today: Congress to Challenge Rule Protecting Planned Parenthood Grants
House Republicans are taking aim this week at an Obama-era rule that bans states from denying federal funds to Planned Parenthood and other health care providers that perform abortions. The House Rules Committee on Tuesday sent legislation to the House floor that would rescind the rule, which prohibits states from withholding family-planning funding from providers for reasons other than their ability to offer family-planning services. (Gaudiano, 2/14)

PHARMACEUTICALS

Stat: Scouring the Brain for Clues to New Treatments for Mental Illness
While demand for mental health drugs has surged, big pharmaceutical companies have largely backed away from investing in the field; the number of psychopharmacological drug research programs has shrunk 70 percent in the last decade, according to NeuroPerspective...To advance the field, researchers say they need to find biomarkers — tangible biological clues that can help diagnose mental illness, just the way high blood glucose levels can signal diabetes. The hope is that those biomarkers could help pinpoint what's gone wrong in the circuitry of a particular patient's brain and offer clues for drug development — and, perhaps one day, even precision psychiatric therapies. (Keshavan, 2/15)

EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

The Washington Post: Could the Most Conservative Members of Congress Save Obamacare?
Try to wrap your head around this possibility: the House Freedom Caucus, the most conservative members of an extremely conservative Republican majority, might be the saviors of the Affordable Care Act. How is such a thing possible? The answer is their devotion to ideological purity, which it turns out may be as disruptive a political force when the GOP is the ruling party as it was when they were the opposition. (Paul Waldman, 2/14)
California Healthline: An Alzheimer's 'Tsunami' Threatens Latinos
The number of Alzheimer's cases is growing rapidly across the entire U.S. population, and could nearly triple by 2050 to 13.8 million, according to the Alzheimer's Association. But the increase is particularly striking among Latinos, who as a group are at least 50 percent more likely than non-Hispanic whites to develop the disease, according to a report by the University of Southern California’s Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging and the Latinos Against Alzheimer’s network. That’s in part because Latinos live longer, on average, than whites and also because they are more likely to suffer from certain chronic conditions that put them at greater risk for Alzheimer’s, the report says. Compounding the challenge, the report notes, is the fact that the elderly population is growing three times faster among Latinos. (de Marco and Ibarra, 2/16)

Los Angeles Times: California State Senator Proposes Banning Prescriptions of Powerful Painkiller Oxycodone for Those Under 21
Seeking to stem the growing opioid abuse crisis, a California state senator is proposing to prohibit prescriptions of the painkiller oxycodone for anyone under the age of 21. Sen. Anthony Portantino (D-La Cañada Flintridge) said his measure, SB 419, would stop younger people from getting early exposure to the highly addictive pain drug, commonly known by its brand name, OxyContin. (Mason, 2/15)

ADMINISTRATION NEWS

If confirmed, she would take over CMS at a moment of particular uncertainty for the health care industry as Republicans seek to dismantle Obamacare but haven't settled on a replacement plan. That makes Verma's work in Indiana and other states especially notable since it could provide a roadmap for what she could do in Washington. (Bradner, 2/16)

The proposed rules, backed by insurance companies, would tighten certain enrollment procedures and cut the health law's open enrollment period in half, in hopes that a smaller but healthier consumer base will put the marketplaces on sounder financial footing and attract more insurance companies in states with limited choices. But part of the market’s problem stems from President Trump’s determination to repeal the health law while the White House and Congress struggle to find a politically acceptable replacement. Even as the Department of Health and Human Services worked to answer insurance company concerns, the Internal Revenue Service and Congress were taking steps that could add uncertainty to the jittery insurance economy. (Pear, 2/15)

The Washington Post: IRS Won’t Withhold Tax Refunds if Americans Ignore ACA Insurance Requirement
The Internal Revenue Service has revoked an Obama-era instruction to taxpayers that was taking effect during the current filing season as a way to further compliance with the ACA’s requirement that most Americans carry health insurance or pay a tax penalty. Under the instruction, the IRS had announced that it would no longer process tax returns for people who fail to send a notice with their returns that they have insurance, are exempt from the requirement or are paying the fine. (Goldstein, 2/15)
HEALTH LAW

The Washington Post: Freedom Caucus Backs ACA ‘Repeal and Replace’ that Counts on Private Health Care
House conservatives, frustrated by GOP leadership’s slow and tentative approach to replacing the Affordable Care Act, have gotten behind legislation by Rep. Mark Sanford (R-S.C.) and Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) that would repeal most of the law and move millions of Americans Health Savings Accounts (HSAs). “We were tired of waiting,” said Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) at a Wednesday press conference on the legislation, “and that’s why we said: Let’s go. Let’s go now.” (Weigel, 2/15)

The Washington Post: House GOP Leaders Will Elaborate on Their Obamacare Plans
House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) told reporters that committee leaders will brief GOP lawmakers on some specific proposals at a closed-door meeting scheduled for Thursday morning. The meeting comes as leaders are working to rally sharply divided GOP members around a single plan to remake the health-care law. Asked whether leaders planned to announce specific elements of the repeal-and-replace plan that will be included in upcoming legislation McCarthy said, “Yes.” McCarthy did not say which elements of the plan would be detailed at the meeting. (Snell, Weigel and DeBonis, 2/15)

MARKETPLACE

The Washington Post: Aetna Chief Executive Says Obamacare is in a ‘Death Spiral’
Aetna chief executive Mark Bertolini said Wednesday that the Affordable Care Act's exchanges — the marketplaces where consumers can buy individual health coverage under President Barack Obama's signature health-care law — are in a "death spiral." Bertolini's remarks at the Wall Street Journal's the Future of Healthcare event came a day after the official end of his company's proposed merger with the health insurer Humana — a divorce that will cost Aetna a $1 billion breakup fee. (Johnson, 2/15)

The Associated Press: Insurer Anthem Fires Back at Cigna
Health insurers Anthem and Cigna are now trading lawsuits instead of working together to salvage a shaky $48-billion buyout agreement. The Blue Cross-Blue Shield carrier Anthem said Wednesday that it is seeking a restraining order to block its smaller rival from terminating their deal, which has already been blocked by a federal judge. (2/15)

Reuters: U.S. Healthcare Costs to Escalate Over Next Decade: Government Agency
The cost of medical care in the United States is expected to grow at a faster clip over the next decade and overall health spending growth will outpace that of the gross domestic product, a U.S. government health agency said on Wednesday. A report by the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) cited the aging of the enormous baby boom generation and overall economic inflation as prime contributors to the projected increase in healthcare spending. (Abutaleb, 2/15)

UC Berkeley biochemist Jennifer Doudna and her European collaborator, Emmanuella Charpentier, have racked up a slew of awards for their work, which makes it very easy to alter the DNA of living things. But their efforts to patent their discovery have been hung up by a competing claim from Feng Zhang at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard. (Netburn, 2/15)
PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Kaiser Health News: How Long You Stay on Opioids May Depend on the Doctor You See in the E.R.
"Physicians are just doing things all over the map," says Dr. Michael Barnett, an assistant professor at the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health and one of the study's authors. "This is a call to arms for people to start paying a lot more attention to having a unified approach." (Gold, 2/15)

The Washington Post: Trump's Claim That There’s ‘Tremendous Amount of Increase’ in Autism Cases
In a meeting with educators, Trump asked the principal of a center that serves students with disabilities about the prevalence of autism. The principal, Jane Quenneville, spoke about the increasing number of students with autism at the Kilmer Center, a Fairfax County public school. But Trump then claimed that there was a "tremendous amount of increase" in autism in general — "really a horrible thing to watch." This exchange is especially noteworthy, because Trump wants to create a vaccine safety commission that could roll back vaccine laws based on the widely discredited theory that vaccines cause autism. (Lee, 2/16)

NPR: Vitamin D Can Reduce Colds and Flu, Study Finds
It's long been known that Vitamin D helps protect our bones, but the question of whether taking Vitamin D supplements can help guard immunity has been more controversial. An analysis published online Wednesday in the British journal the BMJ suggests supplements of the sunshine vitamin can indeed help reduce the risk of respiratory infections — especially among people who don't get enough of the vitamin from diet or exposure to sunlight. (Aubrey, 2/16)

Stat: Zika Persists in Semen, but Shedding Typically Stops in Months
A new study suggests at least half of men who have been infected with Zika will emit traces of the virus in their semen, but in most cases that viral shedding stops after about three months. The research, conducted in Puerto Rico, found that 56 percent of men who had been infected had traces of virus in their semen but about half of them stopped emitting those viral traces by about a month after they first became ill. And by three months after the onset of symptoms, only 5 percent still had virus in their semen. (Branswell, 2/15)

EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

Los Angeles Times: Trump's IRS Stages a Stealth Attack on Obamacare
The Internal Revenue Service has become the first agency to follow President Trump’s directive to start undermining the Affordable Care Act. In a quiet rule change, but an important one, the IRS has told tax preparers and software firms that it won’t automatically reject tax returns that fail to state whether the tax filer had health insurance during the year. That effectively loosens enforcement of the ACA’s individual mandate. It appears to be a direct response to Trump’s Jan. 20 executive order requiring federal agencies “minimize ... the economic and regulatory burdens of the Act.” (Michael Hiltzik, 2/15)

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.
California Healthline: Single-Payer Health Care Bill to be Introduced in California Senate
The bill says that it is the “intent of the Legislature” to enact a law that would establish a comprehensive, single-payer health care program for the benefit of everyone in the state. The legislation, introduced by state Sen. Ricardo Lara (D-Bell Gardens), does not offer specifics of what the plan would look like. A single-payer system would replace private insurance with a government plan that pays for coverage for everyone. Proponents argue that they make health care more affordable and efficient, but opponents say they raise taxpayer costs and give government too much power. (Gorman, 2/17)

California Healthline: Some Immigrants, Fearful of Political Climate, Shy Away from Medi-Cal
Some foreign-born Californians are canceling their Medi-Cal coverage or declining to enroll in the first place, citing fears of a Trump administration crackdown on immigrants. Among those dropping coverage are people in the country legally but concerned about jeopardizing family members who lack permanent legal status. (Bazar, 2/16)

Fresno Bee: California Medi-Cal Leader in Wait-and-See Mode on Affordable Care Act Repeal
Diana Dooley doesn't like to speculate about a repeal, replacement or repair of the Affordable Care Act, but the secretary of California's Health and Human Services Agency knows changes are coming. She's just not sure when Obamacare, as the Affordable Care Act is widely known, will be cut or modified. “My message now is that we have a law and we’re operating under that law,” she said Thursday shortly after speaking to students at the Pay It Forward Luncheon Series at Fresno State. (Anderson, 2/16)

CAPITOL HILL WATCH

The Hill: House Votes to Let States Deny Federal Funds to Abortion Providers
Democrats argued the GOP's effort was aimed at defunding Planned Parenthood, even though the organization is legally prohibited from using federal funds for abortions. "It's no surprise that, once again, congressional Republicans are trying to undermine access to healthcare and basic family services," Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) said on the floor Thursday. Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) called the resolution a "backdoor attempt to restrict access" to abortion. (Hellmann, 2/16)

Stat: E-Cigarettes would be Excluded from Some Regulations Under New Proposal
Congressional supporters of the tobacco industry have wasted no time in proposing legislation to help e-cigarette companies escape rules adopted under President Barack Obama. In what Republican Reps. Tom Cole (Okla.) and Sanford Bishop (Ga.) described as a “clarification,” the two introduced a bill that would revise FDA rules governing the sale and advertising of e-cigarettes and cigars. (Kaplan, 2/16)

Kaiser Health News: Right-to-Die Fight Hits National Stage
Melissa Bailey reports: "Opponents of aid-in-dying laws are claiming a small victory. They won the attention of Congress this week in their battle to stop a growing movement that allows terminally ill patients to get doctors’ prescriptions to end their lives. The Republican-led effort on Capitol Hill to overturn the District of Columbia’s aid-in-dying law could fail by Friday. But advocates worry the campaign will catalyze a broader effort to fully ban the practice, which is legal in six states and being considered in 22 more." (Bailey, 2/16)
ADMINISTRATION NEWS

The New York Times: Trump Health Pick Says Medicaid Needs a Major Overhaul
President Donald Trump’s pick to run the government’s major health insurance programs said Thursday that Medicaid needs a full overhaul but she doesn't support turning Medicare into a “voucher” plan. Indiana health care consultant Seema Verma testified before the Senate Finance Committee on her nomination to lead the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, or CMS. The $1 trillion agency oversees programs that cover about 1 out of 3 Americans. Verma, 46, is a protégé of Vice President Mike Pence, having designed a Medicaid expansion plan along conservative lines for Indiana when he was governor. Her successful consulting business has about a dozen staffers, and if confirmed, she would run an agency with nearly 6,500 employees. (2/16)

HEALTH LAW

The Washington Post: House GOP Discusses Obamacare Replacement Ideas — but Doesn’t Call Them a Plan
According to numerous lawmakers and aides in the room, as well as a policy memo distributed afterward, the House leaders laid out elements of a repeal-and-replace plan — including long-standing Republican concepts like health savings accounts, tax credits and state high-risk pools for the chronically sick. But they did not detail how those elements would fit together or get passed into law. “It’s sort of a smorgasbord right now,” said Rep. Daniel Webster (R-Fla.). (DeBonis and Snell, 2/16)

Reuters: Trump, Republicans Set Timeframe for Introducing Obamacare Replacement
Ryan told reporters on Capitol Hill that House Republicans would introduce legislation to repeal and replace Obama’s program after a 10-day recess that begins on Friday. “After the House returns following the Presidents Day break, we intend to introduce legislation to repeal and replace Obamacare,” Ryan said at a press conference. Presidents Day is on Monday and the House returns on Feb. 27. (Cowan and Morgan, 2/16)

PUBLIC HEALTH AND EDUCATION

California Healthline: Veteran Teaches Therapists How to Talk About Gun Safety when Suicide’s a Risk
Most veterans who commit suicide do so with a gun, but most therapists don’t understand gun culture. A veteran who has struggled with depression himself now helps bridge that gap by educating mental health professionals. But here’s the trouble: Most therapists aren’t gun people. They don’t know how to talk about guns and so they don’t. (Dembosky, KQED, 2/17)

Stat: Flu Vaccine is Only Moderately Protective This Year, CDC Says
This year’s flu vaccine is offering moderate protection against the main family of viruses causing illness, data released Thursday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show. The data come as what has been a pretty active flu season is near its apex in many parts of the country. “We won’t know when the peak has occurred until we’ve passed it and have a couple of weeks to look back,” said Lynnette Brammer, head of domestic influenza surveillance at the CDC. “We hopefully are approaching the peak but we may not be there yet.” (Branswell, 2/16)
EDITORIALS AND OPINIONS

Orange County Register: California Job Losses from Obamacare Repeal? Fear Not!
Obamacare was a cash cow for providers, which now argue it was a program for jobs and economic growth. They now say that repealing Obamacare will kill California jobs. That grabs any politician’s attention, but it is not true. According to a study by the UC Berkeley Labor Center, which is promoted by the California Hospital Association, “The majority (135,000) of these lost jobs would be in the health care industry, including at hospitals, doctor offices, labs, outpatient and ambulatory care centers, nursing homes, dentist offices, other health care settings and insurers. (John R. Graham, 2/16)

The New York Times: Republican Health Proposal would Redirect Money from Poor to Rich
Republicans in Congress have been saying for months that they are working on a plan to repeal and replace Obamacare in the Trump era. Now we have the outline of that plan, and it looks as if it would redirect federal support away from poorer Americans and toward people who are wealthier. (Margot Sanger-Katz, 2/16)

Bloomberg: A Sign that Obamacare Exchanges are Failing
Yet more bad news for Obamacare this week: Molina Healthcare lost $110 million on the exchanges last year, and the CEO told investors, “There are simply too many unknowns with the marketplace program to commit to our participation beyond 2017.” At first glance, it’s hard to see why this piece of news is worth worrying about. UnitedHealth recently projected several times those losses, and it’s a bigger player on the exchanges. Why spend so much time looking at one modest-size insurer? Because Molina is one of the companies that has been repeatedly pointed to, by virtually every health-care-policy wonk in the business, as one of the “bright spots” on the exchanges. (Megan McArdle, 2/16)

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.