

March/April 1999

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The Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard Health News Index is designed to help the news media and people in the health field gain a better understanding of which health stories in the news Americans are following and what they understand about those health issues. Every two months, Kaiser/Harvard issues a new index report. This seventeenth report is based on a survey of 1,200 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between March 1-31, 1999. For comparison purposes, respondents were also asked about other leading issues in the news during the same period.

## HEALTH NEWS STORIES FOLLOWED BY THE PUBLIC

The health news story followed most closely by Americans in March was the trial in which a Michigan jury found Dr. Jack Kervorkian guilty of second degree murder (followed very or fairly closely by 57% of the American people).

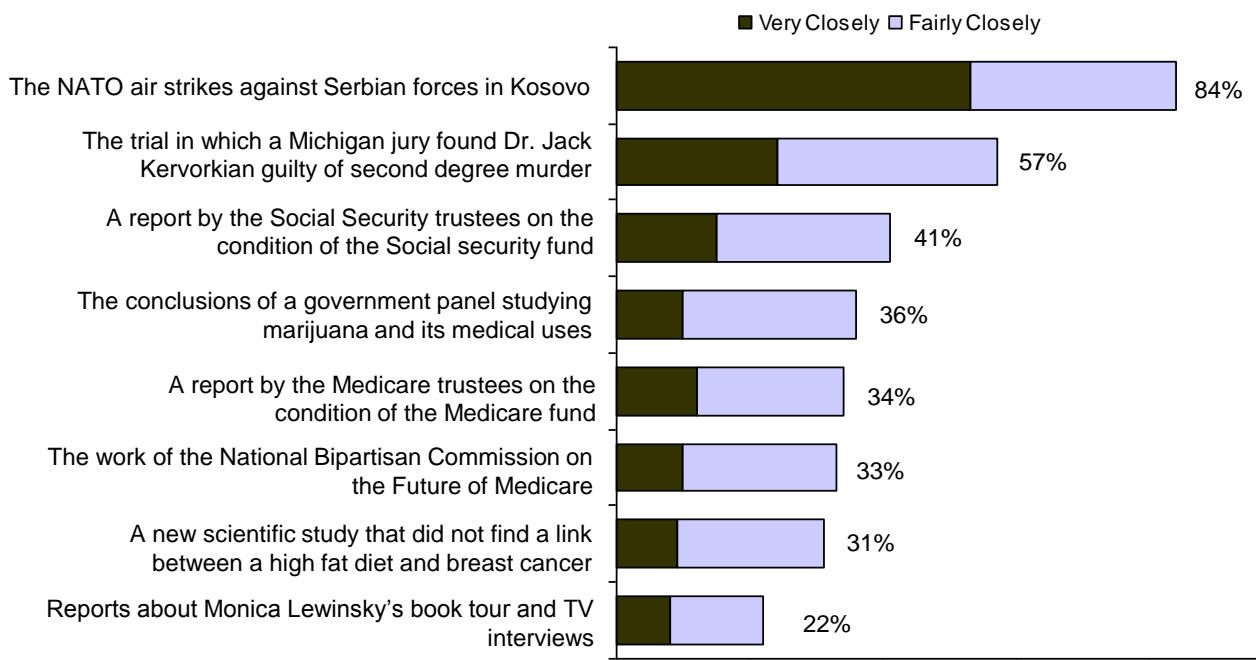
By comparison, 84% closely followed NATO air strikes against Serbian forces in Kosovo. Only 22% reported following Monica Lewinsky's book tour and TV interviews.

Among other health issues in the news, just over a third of Americans (36%) closely followed a government panel's findings that marijuana can be an effective medicine for treating pain, while slightly less than that (31%) said they followed stories on the new scientific study that did not find a link between a high fat diet and breast cancer.

On issues related to government programs, 41% of Americans closely followed reports by the Social Security trustees on the condition of the Social Security trust fund, while 34% closely followed reports by the Medicare trustees on the condition of the Medicare trust fund. A third of the public say they've followed stories about the work of the National Bipartisan Commission on the Future of Medicare.

## THE KAISER/HARVARD HEALTH NEWS INDEX

How closely Americans followed leading stories in the news from March 1 to March 31, 1999



# WHAT THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS ABOUT HEALTH STORIES IN THE NEWS

## Social Security and Medicare

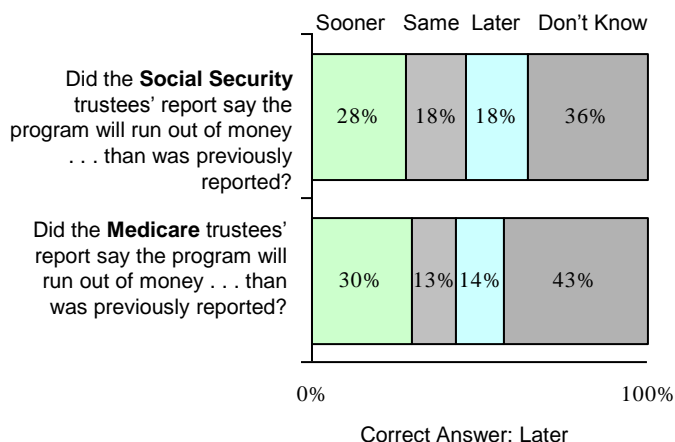
Two out of five Americans closely followed news coverage of the Social Security trustees' report and a third closely followed the report of the Medicare trustees. Asked when the reports said the trust funds are expected to run out, many said they did not know. Fewer than one in five knew the programs are now expected to run out of money later than previously thought.

When asked which of the two programs is expected to be the first not to have enough money to cover all benefits - 38% said Social Security and 44% said Medicare. Eighteen percent did not know.

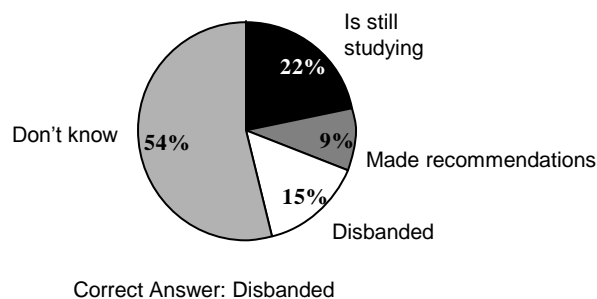
Only one in six Americans were aware that the National Bipartisan Commission on the Future of Medicare disbanded without agreeing on a plan for Medicare's future. One in five thought the commission was still studying the future of Medicare, one in ten thought the commission had made its recommendation and about half said they did not know the status of the commission.

## New Study on Medical Uses of Marijuana

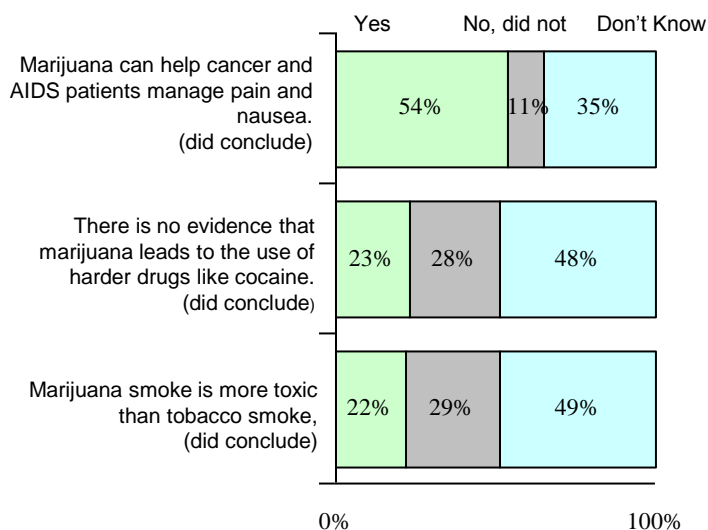
Thirty-six percent of Americans closely followed news reports of a new study on marijuana and its medical uses, and 54% knew this panel found that marijuana can help cancer and AIDS patients manage pain and nausea (11% thought the panel did not report this, 35% said they didn't know). There was less awareness about other panel conclusions: only 23% knew the panel found no evidence that marijuana leads to the use of harder drugs like cocaine, and 22% knew the panel concluded marijuana smoke is more toxic than tobacco smoke.



## The National Bipartisan Commission on Medicare . . .



## Please tell me whether the panel did or did NOT reach the following conclusions:



The Kaiser/Harvard Health News Index is based on a national random sample survey of 1,200 Americans conducted April 10-22, 1999 to measure Americans' interest in and knowledge of health stories covered in the news media during the previous month. The survey was designed and analyzed jointly by the staff of the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University in consultation with the Pew Center for The People and The Press. The survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. The margin of error is  $\approx 3\%$ . For additional copies of this report (# 1489), please call (800) 656-4533.