

**Matt James (650) 854-9400**

**July/August 1999**

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 eighteenth report is based on a survey of 1,000 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between July 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 July was the White House proposal that would expand Medicare benefits to include coverage for prescription drugs (followed very or fairly closely by 40% of the American people).

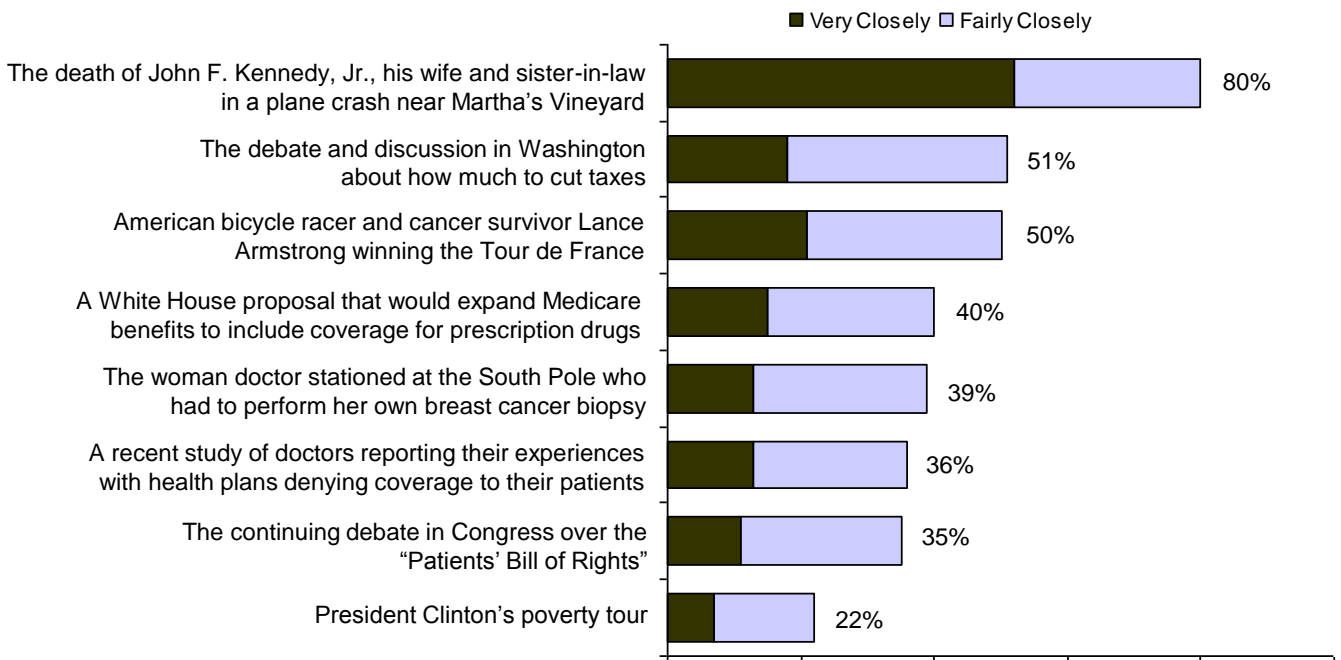
By comparison, 80% closely followed coverage of the death of John F. Kennedy, Jr., his wife and sister-in-law in a plane crash near Martha's Vineyard. About half of Americans reported closely following the debate and discussion in Washington about how much to cut taxes and about the same number closely followed the news about American bicycle racer and cancer survivor Lance Armstrong winning the Tour de France. Only 22% reported following President Clinton's "poverty tour".

Among other health issues in the news, almost four in ten Americans (39%) closely followed news of the woman doctor stationed at the South Pole who had to perform her own breast biopsy.

A little over a third of the public (35%) have followed stories about the continuing debate in Congress over the "Patients' Bill of Rights."

**THE KAISER/HARVARD HEALTH NEWS INDEX**

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

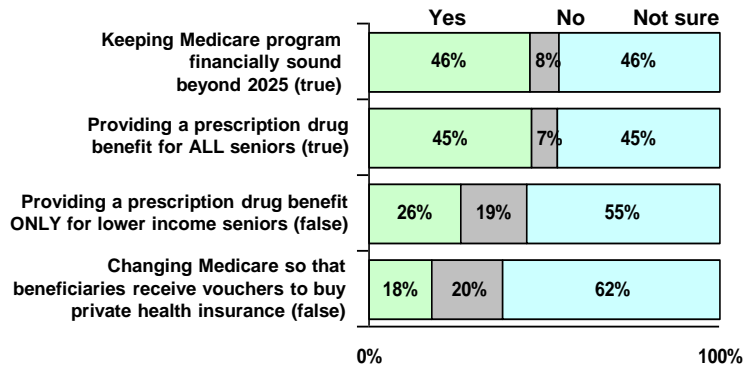


# WHAT THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS ABOUT HEALTH STORIES IN THE NEWS

## White House Medicare Proposal

Two out of five Americans closely followed news coverage of the White House proposal that would expand Medicare benefits to include coverage for prescription drugs. More than four in ten knew the proposal intended to keep the Medicare program financially sound beyond the year 2025 and that it would provide a prescription drug benefit for all seniors. However, just as many said they did not know about specifics of the proposal. More than half were uncertain as to whether or not the White House plan would limit a prescription drug benefit only to lower income seniors or if the plan would provide beneficiaries with vouchers to buy private health insurance.

## Which of the following are part of the White House Medicare proposal?



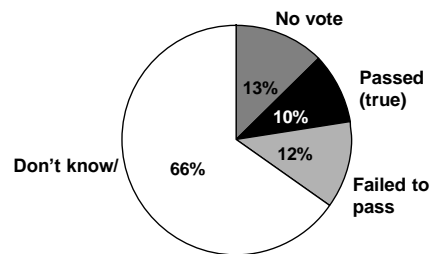
## Patients' Bill of Rights

While 35 percent of the public closely followed news reports of the continuing debate in Congress over the "Patients' Bill of Rights", more than a third (37%) say they had not followed this story at all. Only 14 percent were correctly aware that both Democrats and Republicans had proposed patients' rights legislation (18% believed only the Democrats had, 6% believed only the Republicans had, while 62% did not know). Two-thirds of Americans did not know whether or not the Senate had voted on patients' rights legislation and only one in ten were aware that the Senate had already passed patients' right legislation.

More than a quarter of the public believed correctly that the legislation would give patients greater access to emergency room care and allow patients to appeal health plan decisions to an independent, expert reviewer. However, a quarter also believed, incorrectly, that the legislation would allow patients the right to sue their health plan.

While more than half the public (55%) did not know who the Patients' Rights legislation would apply to, one in four did know it would only apply to certain types of health plans. One in five mistakenly believed it would apply to all health plans.

## What happened with the patients' rights legislation in the Senate?



## What does the Patient's Rights legislation passed by the Senate do?

