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**T**he 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 issues. Every two months since August of 1996, Kaiser/Harvard issues a new index report. This report is based on a survey of 1,515 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between October 29 and November 30, 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**

About half of Americans followed closely three health news stories in late October and November. Fifty-one percent of Americans closely followed the report by the National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine on the large number of medical errors in hospitals. News about the amount of time children spend watching

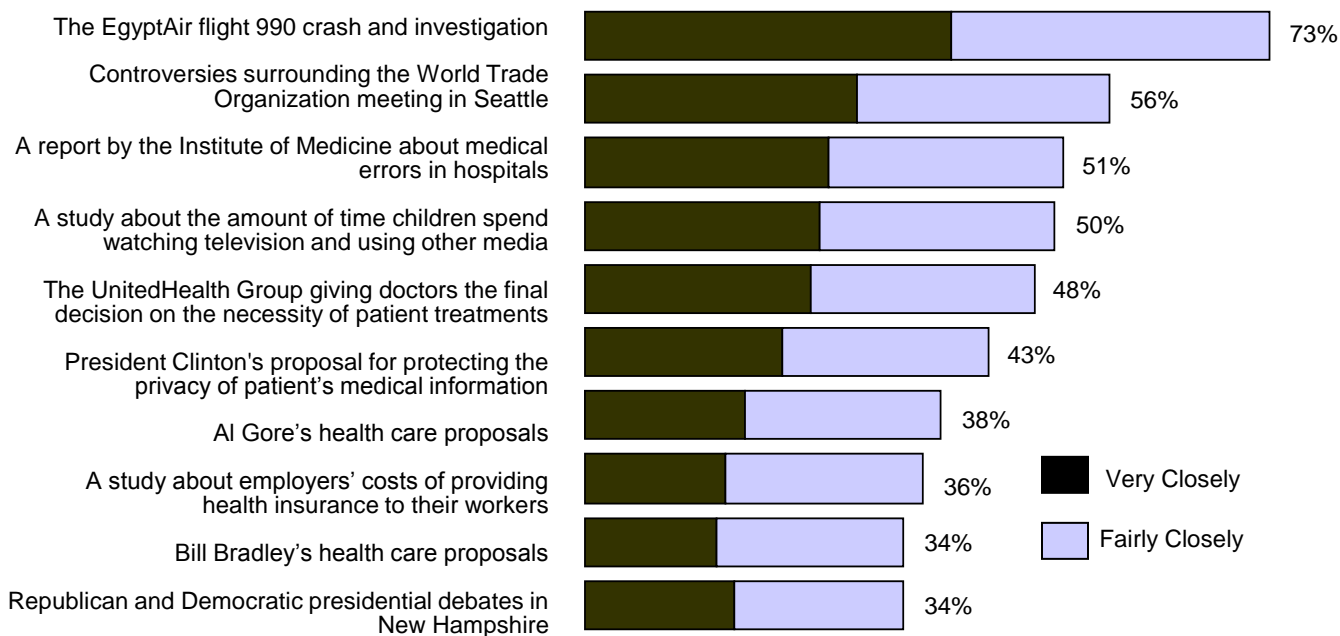
television and using other media was followed closely by 50%. News coverage of UnitedHealth Group's announcement of a new policy to give doctors the final decision on whether patient treatments are necessary was followed by nearly half (48%) of the public.

By comparison, nearly three out of four Americans, 73%, closely followed coverage of the airline crash of EgyptAir flight 990 and the subsequent investigation into its cause. Just over half of Americans (56%) reported closely following the controversies surrounding the World Trade Organization's meeting in Seattle.

Among other health issues in the news, about four in ten Americans (43%) closely followed news of President Clinton's proposal for protecting the privacy of patients' medical information. About one in three closely followed news of Democratic presidential candidates' proposals to provide health insurance to people currently uninsured (38% followed Al Gore's proposals, while 34% followed Bill Bradley's).

**THE KAISER/HARVARD HEALTH NEWS INDEX**

**How closely Americans followed leading stories in the news from October 29 to November 30, 1999**

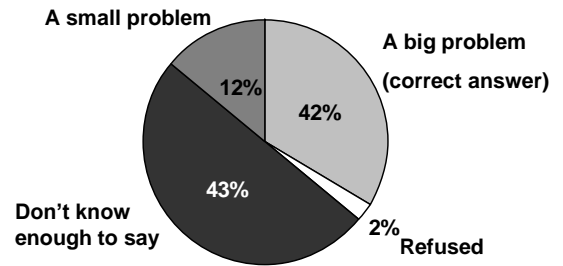


# WHAT THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS ABOUT HEALTH STORIES IN THE NEWS

## Medical Errors

About half (51%) of all Americans closely followed news of the release of a National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine (IOM) report about the large number of medical errors in hospitals. Forty-two percent (42%) knew that the report indicated that medical errors are a serious problem, many resulting in a large number of preventable deaths. However, another 43% didn't know enough to say what the report was about, and 12% thought the news said it was a small problem. The IOM report also listed a number of recommendations for lowering the rate of medical errors. About one-third (32%) of Americans knew that one recommendation was to create a new government center in charge of tracking and working to prevent medical errors. About the same percentage incorrectly thought the report also recommended tougher malpractice laws against those who commit medical errors (32%) or called for more severe punishments of doctors and nurses who make errors (29%).

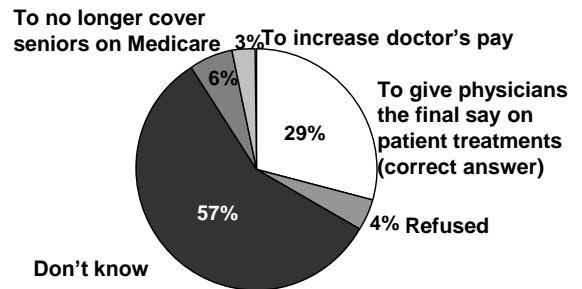
How big a problem is medical errors in hospitals according to a report by the Institute of Medicine?



Which policy change in health coverage did UnitedHealth Group recently announce?

## UnitedHealth Group's Policy Change

Nearly half of Americans (48%) closely followed news of one of the nation's largest health insurer's change in their health coverage policies. Twenty-nine percent (29%) were aware that UnitedHealth Group will allow physicians to have the final decision about whether patient treatments are necessary. Over half (57%) did not know enough about the policy change to say.



### The Top Five Most Closely Followed General Health Stories of 1999

1. Proposals in Washington for stricter gun control laws (May)
2. The federal government's civil lawsuit against the tobacco industry (September)
3. The trial in Michigan in which a jury found Dr. Jack Kervorkian guilty of second degree murder (March)
4. The encephalitis outbreak in the New York City area (September)
5. A White House Summit on ways to prevent youth violence (May)

### The Top Five Most Closely Followed Health Policy Stories of 1999

1. The Institute of Medicine's findings of large numbers of medical errors in hospitals (November)
2. UnitedHealth Group's decision to give doctors the final say on patient treatment (November)
3. A government report that the number of Americans without health insurance has increased (September and October)
4. President Clinton's proposal for protecting the privacy of patients' medical information (October)
5. Continuing debate in Congress about patients' bill of rights (Fall)

The Kaiser/Harvard Health News Index is based on a national random sample survey of 1,515 Americans conducted December 3-13, 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 +/- 3%. For additional copies of this report (# 1565), please call the Kaiser Family Foundation's Publications Request Line at 1-800-656-4533.