

## THE PUBLIC AND PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Prescription drugs have become an integral part of medical practice. They help keep people healthy and save lives. But rising prescription drug costs have placed a growing burden on consumers, employers, and public programs. The issue of drug coverage for seniors under Medicare has moved to center stage in the Presidential election. This *Public Opinion Update* summarizes key findings from several surveys conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation in conjunction with other partners including *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, the Harvard School of Public Health, and *The Washington Post*.

### PRESCRIPTION DRUG USE TODAY

More than 9 in 10 Americans (91%) report that they take prescription drugs. More than half (54%) say they take prescription drugs on a regular basis, and one-fourth (24%) say that they take three or more drugs regularly. Almost one-third (30%) say they currently have more than five prescription drugs in their medicine cabinet. Nearly 1 in 10 (8%) estimate that they spent \$1000 or more out-of-pocket on prescription drugs in the past year.

Elderly Americans are more likely than adults under age 65 to say that they are regular users of prescription drugs (82% vs. 49%); that they take three or more prescription drugs regularly (55% vs. 17%); that they currently have more than five drugs in their medicine cabinet (40% vs. 28%); and that they spent \$1000 or more out-of-pocket on prescription drugs last year (19% vs. 6%).

One-quarter (25%) of Americans report that they do not have prescription drug coverage through their health insurance plan. Paying for prescription drugs is difficult for some Americans. Almost 3 in 10 (29%) say they have not filled a prescription because of the cost; 25% say they have to give up other things to buy prescription drugs for themselves or their families; and 10% report having to give up basic necessities such as cutting down on food to pay for medicines. More than 1 in 10 (14%) say that paying for prescription medicines they need for themselves or their families is a "serious problem."

Even though older Americans are more likely than younger Americans to use prescription drugs, they are more likely than people under age 65 to report that they do not have any kind of prescription drug coverage (38% vs. 23%). The elderly are also more likely than the non-elderly (23% vs. 13%) to say that paying for prescription drugs for themselves or their families is a "serious problem." Furthermore, 16% of the elderly say they have not filled a prescription because of the cost; 21% say they have had to give up things to buy prescription drugs; and 9% say they have had to give up basic necessities to pay for their medicines.

### THE DEBATE OVER PRESCRIPTION DRUG COVERAGE FOR THE ELDERLY

Compared to 1998, the public appears better informed about the lack of drug coverage under Medicare. The majority of the public (55%) now reports that the traditional Medicare program

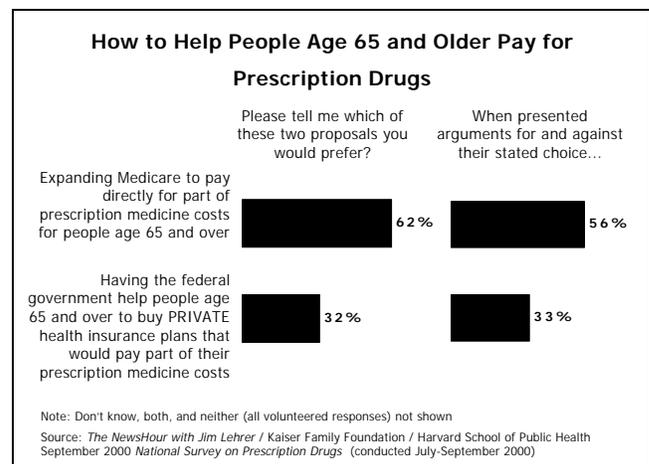
does not pay for prescription drugs for those 65 and older. In 1998, far fewer (29%) said this.

Support for providing drug coverage to seniors is broad, with over three-fourths (76%) of the public favoring guaranteeing prescription drug coverage to everyone on Medicare, even if it means more government spending to pay for it.

When it comes to the hotly debated question of "how" to expand prescription drug coverage, the public prefers expanding Medicare as opposed to using private insurance plans. Sixty-two percent prefer "expanding Medicare to pay directly for part of prescription medicine costs for people age 65 and over." Thirty-two percent prefer "having the federal government help people age 65 and over to buy private health insurance plans that would pay part of their prescription medicine costs."

When presented with the arguments for and against their stated choice, a slightly smaller majority (56%) continues to prefer expanding Medicare; 33% favor having the government help people buy private insurance plans; 2% favor both options equally; 3% say "neither" and 6% say "don't know." These results are comparable to a July 2000 survey of registered voters that found the majority (57%) favored expanding Medicare versus having the federal government help seniors buy private coverage (36%).

When asked more broadly about which the public trusts more to provide health insurance coverage to seniors, the public is more likely to prefer the current government-run Medicare program (47%) as opposed to a plan offered through the health care industry (35%). This is a shift from 1998, when around one-third of the public (36%) said they trusted the government-run Medicare program and 4 in 10 (40%) said they trusted private industry more.



The public expresses interest in helping cover prescription drug costs for all seniors (49%) over only assisting low-income seniors (38%).

## REGULATION OF PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

About 6 in 10 Americans (62%) are aware that over the past five years the price of prescription drugs has risen "faster than most other things." And 63% also believes that people in Canada, Mexico, and Western Europe pay lower prices for the same prescription drug than people in this country.

A majority of the public (60%) thinks there is not as much regulation as there should be of the costs of prescription drugs. However, when the criticism that limiting prices might lead to less research and development of new drugs is mentioned to those who favored regulation, support drops to 42%.

While a majority of the public says that "health plans should pay for brand name drugs when a doctor requests them even if a cheaper generic drug is available" (64%), this support falls to 40% if it would mean they would have to pay higher health insurance premiums. Half of Americans (50%) say that "health plans should pay for brand name drugs when a patient requests them," but this support falls to 28% if it would mean they would have to pay higher health insurance premiums. Eight in 10 people (80%) say that in most cases brand name prescription drugs and generic drugs are "about the same" in quality, compared to 14% who think brand name drugs are "better" and 3% who think they are "worse."

Allowing the import of lower-cost prescription drugs from other countries is favored by almost 8 in 10 (79%) as long as the safety of those drugs is guaranteed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Support falls to 50% when the criticism that importation might lead to less research and development is raised.

## HOW PEOPLE GET INFORMATION ABOUT PRESCRIPTION DRUGS, AND THE ROLE OF ADVERTISING

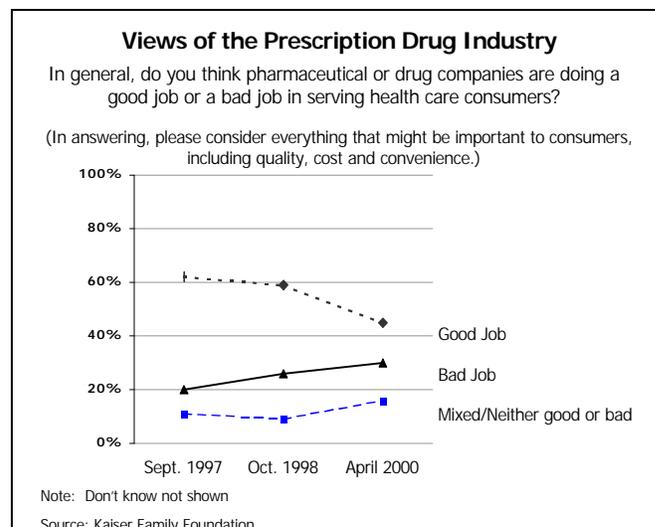
Most people feel well-informed about prescription drugs, with 87% saying that they were "very" or "somewhat" confident that they had enough information the last time they got a prescription drug which they had not taken before. When asked about how much they trust different sources to provide accurate information about prescription medicines, people were most likely to say they trust their doctors (95%) and their pharmacists (93%) "a lot" or "somewhat", followed by the information included in packages of prescription medicines (89%), the FDA (80%), and their family and friends (61%). Almost half (48%) say they to trust advertisements for accurate information about prescription medicines. Among the elderly, 35% said they trusted drug ads.

Almost all Americans (91%) have seen an ad for prescription drugs in the past year, with 86% having seen an ad on the TV or radio, and 73% having seen an ad in a newspaper or magazine. Around half of those who have seen or heard such advertisements says that they generally do an "excellent" or "good" job describing potential benefits of the drug (58%), what condition or disease the drug is designed to treat (51%), and

round one-third (34%) of Americans say that they talked to a doctor after seeing or hearing an ad for prescription drugs, and 7% report that they asked a doctor to prescribe a drug they saw or heard advertised.

## CHANGING VIEWS OF THE PRESCRIPTION DRUG INDUSTRY

The public's attitudes toward drug companies have recently become more negative. In 1997, the majority of the public (62%) thought that pharmaceutical companies were doing a "good job" in serving health care consumers in terms of issues such as quality, cost, and convenience. Support remained almost as high in 1998 (59%), but dropped to 45% in April of 2000.



Tobacco companies (71%), HMOs (57%), oil companies (57%), and health insurance companies (52%) have higher "unfavorable" ratings than pharmaceutical companies (44%), while airlines (28%), banks (26%), hospitals (25%), and doctors (17%) get lower "unfavorable" ratings.

People are about as likely to say that that tobacco companies (76%), oil companies (75%), and drug companies (73%) make too much profit, followed by health insurance companies (68%), HMOs (56%), banks (50%), hospitals (46%), and airlines (33%).

Data used in this *Public Opinion Update* are from the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health National Survey on Prescription Drugs* (9/00), the *Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University Issues in the 2000 Election: Health Care* (7/00), March/April, March/April 2000 Kaiser/Harvard Health News Index, the August/September 1997 Kaiser/Harvard Managed Care Survey, and the August/September 1998 Kaiser/Harvard National Survey on Medicare. For more information on prescription drugs and analysis of policy proposals to cover them, or for complete question wordings, margins of error or other analysis, please contact us or look for our information on the web at [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org). To request additional free copies of this publication, contact our Publications Request Line at 1-800-656-4533 (ask for document #3060).