



## Health News Stories Followed By The Public

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The Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard Health News Index is designed to help the news media and people in the health care field gain a better understanding of what health stories in the news Americans are following and what they understand about the health issues covered in the news. Every two months, Kaiser/Harvard will issue a new index report. This second report is based on a survey of 1,008 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between August 27 and September 27, 1996. For comparison purposes, respondents were also asked about other leading issues in the news during the same period.

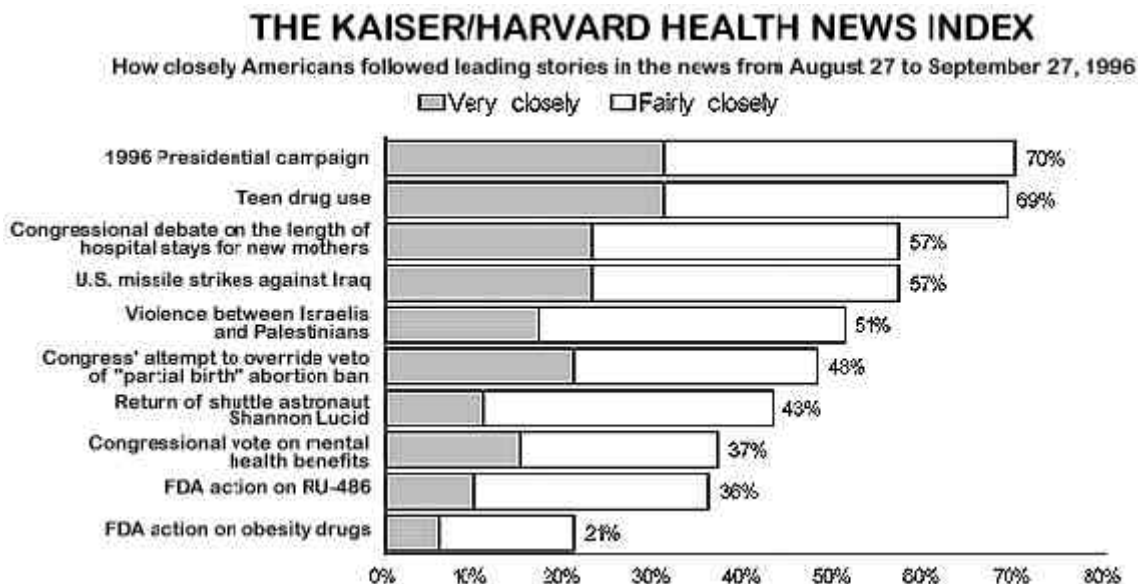
Drug use among teens was the health-related news story Americans reported following most closely. Somewhat surprisingly, the public said they followed the teen drug use story as closely as the presidential campaign during September--69% following teen drug use very or fairly closely and 70% following the presidential campaign.

Equal numbers of Americans (57%) followed the Congressional debate about how long insurance companies would be required to pay for new mothers' hospital stays and news coverage of U.S. missile strikes against Iraq. Another component of the same legislation that affected new mothers' hospital stays also contained provisions dealing with insurance plans' coverage of mental health benefits, but only 37% reported following that story closely.

About half of Americans (48%) said they closely followed

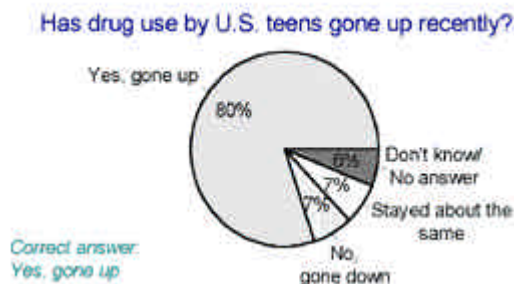
Congress' attempt to override President Clinton's veto of the "partial-birth" or "late-term" abortion ban. Another abortion-related story, the FDA's conditional approval of RU-486, was followed very or fairly closely by 36% of Americans.

About one in five Americans (21%) said they had followed FDA action on obesity drugs such as Redux and Meridia.

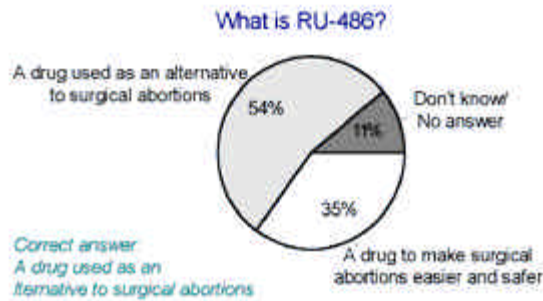


## What The Public Understands About Health Stories in The News

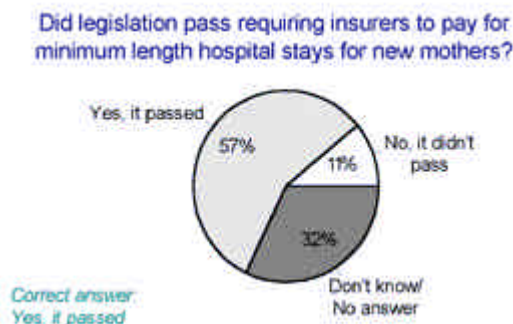
*Teen Drug Use:* Just as most Americans said they followed reports on teen drug use, most knew what these reports said. Eight in ten correctly reported that the basic story in the news was that drug use among American teens had recently gone up. Public awareness of that issue may have been raised by the attention given to it by the presidential candidates.



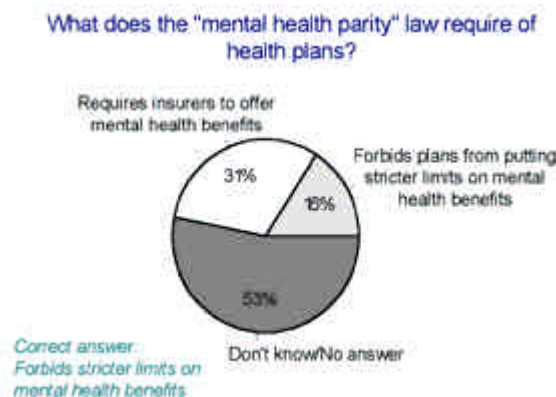
**RU-486:** Though most Americans didn't closely follow the FDA's action on RU-486--only 28% knew that the FDA had given it conditional approval-- a majority knew what RU-486 was. Slightly more than half (54%) knew that it was a drug to be used as an alternative to surgical abortion. Most (65%) also knew that it would be available only through a doctor.



**Hospital Stays for New Mothers:** Six in ten Americans (57%) knew that Congress had passed legislation requiring health plans to pay for a minimum length of hospital stay for mothers and their newborns. Virtually the same proportion (60%) knew the minimum length of time insurers would have to pay for was 48 hours.



**Mental Health Coverage:** The same legislation that required insurance companies to pay for a minimum hospital stay for new mothers also contained provisions affecting mental health benefits offered by insurance plans. Americans were much less knowledgeable about this part of the bill. Only 16% knew that it would forbid health plans from putting stricter limits on mental health benefits than are placed on other medical benefits. Most (84%) either thought the so-called "mental health parity bill" would require insurance plans to offer mental health benefits to all members or didn't know what the bill did.



The Kaiser/Harvard Health News Index is based on a national random sample survey of 1,008 Americans conducted October 11-15, 1996, to measure Americans' interest in and knowledge of health stories covered by 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 and conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. The margin of error is  $\pm 3\%$ . For additional copies of this report, please call (800)656-4533.