

## Zika Update



# Health Policy Briefing

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The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has declared a public health emergency in Puerto Rico, saying that the Zika virus poses a significant threat to public health on the island. This step will allow Puerto Rico to apply for additional funding for the purpose of Zika prevention and education. More than 10,000 Puerto Ricans have been diagnosed with the virus, including at least 1,035 pregnant women. The White House projects that 25 percent of the territory's residents will contract the virus this year. The number of Florida residents who have contracted Zika also continues to rise, with latest totals at 461 travel-rated cases, 33 local transmissions, and 63 cases involving pregnant women. A number of new cases have also been discovered in Miami Beach, which has spurred a debate about whether public health officials should declare the tourist destination an active transmission site. Governor Rick Scott has already announced the provision of additional resources for the tourism industry to improve Zika awareness, including offering educational materials and mosquito spraying to businesses like hotels, attractions, and restaurants. Florida has increased the number of individuals being tested for the virus by tenfold. On average, the rest of the nation has doubled testing rates over the course of the summer. The additional testing will likely result in a sharp increase in the number of confirmed Zika cases. A new study published last week concludes that the virus may actually affect adult brain cells, in addition to fetal brain cells. The study, which was conducted in mice, affected adult brain cells linked to learning and memory. This new finding indicates the need for further research about both the short-term and long-term impacts of the virus, and raises new concerns that getting infected by Zika as an adult may not be as harmless as formerly thought. Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) Dr. Anthony Fauci stated in an interview last week that Zika vaccine development efforts are on track for at least the next three or four months, though funding will be drained by the end of the year. He stressed that additional funding will be needed to continue vaccine development through calendar year 2017. The total number of confirmed Zika cases across the United States and its territories has risen to 10,295, a 145 percent increase since Congress adjourned for recess in mid-July.

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### ***Lawmakers Request CDC Guidelines on Opioids and Acute Pain***

Senators Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) and Shelley Moore Capito (R-W.V.) have **written** a letter to the President requesting that the administration develop and publish guidelines on the prescribing of opioids for acute pain treatment. “Prevention of overprescribing or inappropriate prescribing of opioids is a key component to combating the opioid epidemic. By developing and publishing a comprehensive guideline for prescribing opioids for the treatment of acute pain, we can minimize the initial exposure to opioid medications and further limit diversion of opioid prescriptions, which can have positive downstream effects on combatting opioid abuse,” the Senators write. The lawmakers explain that not all individuals with opioid use disorders began misusing opioids after receiving a prescription for chronic pain, and argue that the overprescribing of opioids for acute pain is particularly problematic because of the heightened risk of abuse for patients who have not had previous exposure to illicit substances, as well as the research indicating that these prescriptions are frequently diverted to others. Earlier this year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a guideline on pain killer prescribing for the treatment of chronic pain.

### ***New User Fee Study Shows Approvals Have Not Kept Pace with Innovation***

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has collected \$7.67 billion in user fees from pharmaceutical companies since 1992. Despite dramatic increases to the fees each year, new drug approvals have not kept up with the number of ideas entering clinical trials, according to a new **study** from Avalere. User fees account for 68 percent of the FDA’s review budget for prescription drugs, and 58 percent of the review budget for generic drugs. The FDA user fee programs will expire on September 30, 2017, and reauthorization negotiations are already underway.

### ***CMS Releases Data on Drug Spending***

As a part of the agency’s effort to increase transparency and public understanding of drug costs, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) released its second annual data analysis of Medicare pharmaceutical spending. According to the data released last week, 375 drugs saw double digit increases in costs per prescription in 2014. While this data does not factor discounts and rebates into consideration, the sizable increases in costs compared to inflation come at a time when the pharmaceutical industry is facing criticism regarding rapid price hikes. The CMS data also shows a growth in opioid spending, with both an increasing number of claims for pain medication as well as increasing costs per claim. The narcotic best known as Vicodin remained the most prescribed medication in Medicare Part D drug plans in 2014. The next most prescribed drug was lisinopril, a blood pressure medication. CMS estimates that \$121 billion worth of medication was prescribed as a part of the Part D program in 2014.

## **Upcoming Congressional Hearings and Markups**

***House Veterans’ Affairs Committee hearing titled “From Tumult to Transformation: The Commission on Care and the Future of the VA Healthcare System;” 10:30 a.m., 334 Cannon Bldg.; September 7***