

Leading the News

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Administration Announces Expanded Catastrophic Coverage Options For Those With Canceled Policies.

News of a change to the Affordable Care Act attracts significant coverage today, including on the front pages of several national newspapers. The large scale impact of the decision is not immediately clear.

The [Wall Street Journal](#) (12/20, A6, Radnofsky, Subscription Publication) reports that yesterday, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius announced that the Obama Administration would allow some people with plans that have been canceled under the terms of the Affordable Care Act to purchase catastrophic health insurance plans in 2014. These plans would normally not meet the standards for insurance set by the Act. The announcement revealed an adjustment to the landmark health law that would allow an unclear number of people with canceled plans to have a hardship exemption. In her statement, Sebelius wrote that some people with canceled plans may have trouble paying premiums for new coverage, "As a result, in addition to their existing options these individuals will also be able to buy a catastrophic plan." Some members of the insurance industry are concerned that the expanded use of hardship plans could negatively affect the market.

The [New York Times](#) (12/20, Pear, Subscription Publication) reports on its front page that the Obama Administration has broadly defined who qualifies for a catastrophic plan eligibility: "If the consumer believes that the plan options available in the marketplace in their area are more expensive than their canceled health insurance policy, they will be eligible for catastrophic coverage through a hardship exemption." Those receiving such an exemption will be able to satisfy the Affordable Care Act's individual insurance mandate with a catastrophic policy. The Times points out that the Obama Administration previously delayed other aspects of the ACA starting in November, 2011.

On its front page, the [Washington Post](#) (12/20, Goldstein) notes the controversy surrounding the change. Robert Zirkelbach, spokesman for the trade group American's Health Insurance Plans, warned about the potential impact: "This type of last-minute change will cause tremendous instability in the marketplace and lead to further confusion and disruption for consumers." Joanne Peters, a spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Human Services, defended the move, calling it "a common sense clarification of the law."

Administration Claims Fewer Than 500,000 Are Without Coverage As A Result Of The ACA. The [AP](#) (12/20, Pace) reports that the Administration estimates that "less than a half million people whose health insurance was canceled" due to ACA rules "have not yet found other coverage," and "that figure could shrink in the coming days."

[USA Today](#) (12/20, Kennedy) reports that the estimate comes from four anonymous "senior administration officials." USA Today says the "sub-500,000 figure counters Republican claims that more Americans will lose coverage starting Jan. 1 than will be newly insured." USA Today notes that

a Heritage Foundation report released this week "said 'millions of Americans have lost and will lose their coverage' due to the law and cited 4.7 million cancellation letters."

[Bloomberg News](#) (12/20, Talev, Wayne) notes that in California, "more than 1 million policy holders received letters from their current insurers saying their coverage will be canceled after Dec. 31 because their plans don't comply, and hundreds of thousands were canceled in other states."

According to the [Los Angeles Times](#) (12/20, Hennessey), the officials “said they had arrived at the estimate over weeks of contacting insurers and combing through the administration’s own enrollment data.” However, the Times notes that the AP “put the number of cancellation notices sent at 3.5 million.”

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Diagnostic Radiology

Experienced Sonographers May Competently Handle Screening Breast US.

[Aunt Minnie](#) (12/20, Ridley) reports that according to research presented at a recent medical conference, “handheld screening breast ultrasound [US] in the hands of experienced sonographers yielded a similar cancer detection rate and positive predictive value to the reported performance of physician-performed ultrasound screening programs in the literature.” Researchers arrived at this conclusion after reviewing data on “916 consecutive women who underwent screening breast ultrasound between October 2011 and March 2013.”

New Technology Provides Detailed Ultrasound Images.

[TIME](#) (12/19, Sifferlin) reports on GE’s HDlive ultrasound technology, which combines 3D and 4D imaging with a light source that can be moved, “making it possible for soon-to-be-parents to see the facial expressions of their child, and even watch it yawn.” GE made the technology available in 2011 and in 2013 the company “made the technology accessible to small clinics as well as big facilities and hospitals.” GE’s ultimate vision is to expand this technology into other areas of medical imaging, “potentially providing the most realistic images of the heart or inner muscular or skeletal system.”

Research Sheds Light On Long Term Effects Of Brain Injury.

The [Scripps Howard News Service](#) (12/20, Bowman) reports on recent efforts by scientists using “unusual imaging methods to detect the long-term effects of brain injury in several experiments on humans or mice.” The most recent such study was presented earlier this month by neuropsychologist P. Tyler Roskos, who used “a special magnetic resonance imaging method that was able to detect damage to nerve-signal-carrying white matter in the brains of veterans exposed to a blast.” Such injury patterns are often hard to detect. A different study, reported in September by the VA Puget Sound Health Care System, examined mice and found “that a single mild blast exposure can cause brain injuries that modify structures or molecules related to degenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s.”

Simultaneous PET/MRI For Patients With Acute MI May Be Feasible.

[Aunt Minnie](#) (12/20, Forrest) reports that according to research presented at a recent medical conference, “simultaneous PET/MRI for patients with acute myocardial infarction [MI] is feasible.” The 25-patient study “showed agreement between PET and MRI regarding myocardial viability and infarct quantification, prompting the researchers to theorize that cardiac PET/MRI could provide quantitative information on metabolic processes.” In turn, such information “might be incorporated into cardiac MRI protocols to improve risk stratification in acute myocardial infarction.”

Many Uninsured Hesitant To Seek Coverage Via ACA Exchanges.

The [Wall Street Journal](#) (12/20, A1, Martin, Weaver, Subscription Publication), in a front-page article titled, "Last-Minute Health-Site Enrollment Proves A Hard Sell," reports on the obstacles facing the Administration as it tries to encourage the uninsured to purchase insurance via the exchanges established by the Affordable Care Act. In particular, the Journal says that many who tried unsuccessfully to enroll online in the first weeks after the ACA's rollout are hesitant to try again. According to the Journal, insurers say many people are also concerned about the exchange's vulnerability to hackers.

Some Fear Exchange Problems May Scare Away Younger Consumers. The [AP](#) (12/19) reports on ongoing fears that the problems with the electronic interface for the Affordable Care Act may scare away younger users. The ACA strikes a balance between a consumer's access to affordable care and the overall stability of the larger insurance market: "Americans in their 60s generally use about \$5 in health care for every \$1 used by those in their 20s, but the law limits insurers to collecting \$3 in premiums from that 60-year-old for every \$1 they collect from a 20-something." As a result, the ACA's individual mandate strives to get younger and healthier people to purchase health insurance in order to offset the costs of older consumers.

HHS OIG: Monitoring Physician Medicare Billing Activity Could Save Millions.

The [Wall Street Journal](#) (12/20, Schatz, Subscription Publication) reports on a report by the Office of Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The report, scheduled for release today, suggested monitoring the total amount of money individual physicians bill to Medicare and flagging those with cumulative totals over \$3 million. Such a policy could generate several million dollars every year in savings. However, the Journal notes that such reductions would have a small effect on the \$65 billion annually spent on Medicare physician reimbursement.

Thursday's Lead Stories

- [Insurers Extend ACA Payment Deadline.](#)
- [With Value-Based Insurance, Patients Pay For Unneeded Procedures.](#)
- [Obesity May Impact Bone Growth In Teenagers.](#)
- [Deleting Old PACS Images May Extend Life Of PACS Archive.](#)
- [NYTimes/CBS Poll: Uninsured Disapprove Of ACA More Than Those Who Have Coverage.](#)

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