Addressing Disparate Impact of COVID-19 on Minorities: Secretary Azar and Surgeon General Adams spoke to the importance and the work that our Department is doing to address health care disparities in “How the Trump Administration is Fighting COVID-19 in Communities of Color,” published in the Dallas Morning News. The op-ed focuses on the actions the Administration is taking to address the health care disparities both prior to and as a result of the pandemic.

“Telemedicine is here to stay” says Verma: Many of you are highly supportive of the various ways in which HHS has made telehealth more available during COVID-19. Today Administrator Verma had an article published in Health Affairs which outlines data on what CMS is seeing in this area, including the tremendous uptick in seniors using telehealth. Some nuggets you might find interesting:

- Before the public health emergency, approximately 13,000 beneficiaries in fee-for-service (FFS) Medicare received telemedicine in a week.
- In the last week of April, nearly 1.7 million beneficiaries received telehealth services.
- Across all age groups, 25-34 percent of beneficiaries have received a telemedicine service.
- Encouragingly, there was no significant difference by race or ethnicity among beneficiaries who received telemedicine services.

In her concluding remarks, Verma notes that, “The rapid adoption of telemedicine among providers and patients has shown that telehealth is here to stay. CMS remains committed to ensuring that the government supports innovation in telehealth that leverages modern technology to enhance patient experience, providing more accessible care.”

Data Collection Transition: There has been a lot of talk today about the changes we are making in data collection for hospitals. The bottom line is that HHS needs access to real time information on how many COVID patients are in any given hospital and their condition. For example, we are allocating remdesivir to states based on patient counts. If we don’t have real time data, then a state will miss receiving an allocation commensurate with their need. CDC’s system does not have that immediate turn-around and also has some other shortcomings when it comes to quickly pivoting to meet the needs in a pandemic. Therefore, HHS is moving to a more streamlined 21st century data collection system that will allow for better data automation, more transparency, reduced burdens on hospitals, and greater data access for health care experts and government officials. This is no “end run” around CDC. Instead, by transitioning from the CDC NHSN to HHS Protect System, HHS will be able to better utilize real-time, automated data which will improve the federal COVID response to ensure faster and more accurate distribution of therapeutics and supplies to all COVID patients across the U.S. The hospital data will be accessible to hospitals, states, localities and tribal partners via HHS Protect. HHS released information and FAQs related to the updated hospital reporting protocols.

Disappointing Turn on the Opioid Overdose Deaths: CDC released preliminary provisional drug overdose death counts for 2019. The numbers show a 4.6 percent increase from the prior year. This is most disappointing as we had started to see the overdose death rate coming down. We will continue to partner with states to support prevention, recovery, and support.

How to Volunteer in a COVID-19 Clinical Study: NIH released information regarding volunteering in a COVID-19 clinical study. Visit the COVID-19 Prevention Network (CoVPN) website to take the questionnaire and join the CoVPN Volunteer Screening Registry. You may be contacted if trials open up in your area.
Testing

Point of Care Test Instruments Will be Sent to Nursing Homes for More and Faster COVID-19 Testing: HHS announced a large-scale procurement of FDA-authorized rapid point-of-care diagnostic test instruments and tests to be distributed to nursing homes in the U.S., starting in COVID-19 hotspot locations or geographic areas with particular vulnerability of older adults. This initiative is a one-time procurement of devices and tests targeted to facilitate on-site testing among nursing home residents and staff. Through this crucial action, nursing homes will be able to augment their current capacity for coronavirus testing, bolstering their response and helping to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Partnership with Smiths Medical to Expand Domestic Manufacturing Capacity for Safety Needles and Syringes: BARDA and the Department of Defense’s Joint Program Executive Office for Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Defense entered into a Technology Investment Agreement with Smiths Medical, Inc. to expand the capacity to manufacture safety needles and syringes in the United States. HHS and DoD are working together as part of Operation Warp Speed to ensure the availability of needles and syringes. By taking steps to increase the ability to produce safety needles and syringes in the U.S., the federal government can reduce the nation’s dependence on other countries to provide these potentially lifesaving supplies.

How to Obtain CDC’s COVID-19 Diagnostic Test and Supplies: CDC updated information for laboratories on the diagnostic test for COVID-19 and its supplies. The International Reagent Resource (IRR) is distributing the diagnostic panel and supplies to registered state and local public health laboratories so they can perform SARS-CoV-2 testing.

Collecting Anterior Nasal Swab: CDC released a graphic on how to collect your anterior nasal swab sample for COVID-19 testing.

Testing Updates: To date, the FDA has currently authorized 179 tests under EUAs; these include 148 molecular tests, 29 antibody tests, and 2 antigen tests.

Treatment

Coronavirus Treatment Acceleration Program: FDA has posted an updated Coronavirus Treatment Acceleration Program (CTAP) webpage. The webpage provides information about CTAP’s purpose, strategy and operations. Specifically, this revised webpage includes a dashboard showing crucial statistics related to the development of potential COVID-19 therapeutics. Also included are key guidance and links for therapeutic developers, researchers, patients and consumers. FDA also released a new FDA Voices, titled An Update and Behind the Scenes: FDA’s Coronavirus Treatment Acceleration Program, to discuss the new program.

Dexamethasone Sodium Phosphate Added to Compounding Lists: FDA added dexamethasone sodium phosphate to the lists of drugs for temporary compounding by outsourcing facilities and pharmacy compounders during the COVID-19 public health emergency. These updates help address shortages and access concerns affecting some drugs urgently needed for hospitalized COVID-19 patients. The updated lists are referenced in the following guidances: Temporary Policy for Compounding of Certain Drugs for
Hospitalized Patients by Outsourcing Facilities during the COVID-19 public health emergency and Temporary Policy for Compounding of Certain Drugs for Hospitalized Patients by Pharmacy Compounders not Registered as Outsourcing Facilities during the COVID-19 public health emergency guidance for industry.

Infection Prevention and Control Recommendations for Healthcare Personnel During the COVID-19 Pandemic: CDC updated interim infection prevention and control recommendations by healthcare personnel to interview persons under investigation for COVID-19. Updates include the addition of language that protective eyewear (e.g., safety glasses, trauma glasses) with gaps between glasses and the face likely do not protect eyes from all splashes and sprays.

Warning Letters for Unapproved COVID-19 Products: As part of the FDA’s effort to protect consumers, the agency issued warning letters to the following two firms for selling unapproved products in the United States with false or misleading claims that their products can mitigate, prevent, treat, diagnose or cure COVID-19 in people: Health Beauty Love, which offers tincture products, including “E-Munity,” and Kegan Wellness, which offers products, including “She Vitamin C Tablets,” “She+ Tablets”, and “Giloe+ Tablets.” There are currently no FDA-approved products to prevent or treat COVID-19.

CMS Updates

Impact of Expansion of Medicare Telehealth and Next Steps: As noted earlier, in a Health Affairs blog post, CMS Administrator Seema Verma shared data highlighting the impact of telehealth on beneficiary access and described how CMS is using this information to assess how these expanded telehealth policies might remain in place beyond the COVID-19 public health emergency.


Reopening Information

CDC Calls on Americans to Wear Masks to Prevent COVID-19 Spread: In an editorial published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), CDC reviewed the latest science and affirms that cloth face coverings are a critical tool in the fight against COVID-19 that could reduce the spread of the disease, particularly when used universally within communities. There is increasing evidence that cloth face coverings help prevent people who have COVID-19 from spreading the virus to others.

Social Distancing: CDC updated information on social distancing in indoor and outdoor spaces to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Toolkit for Colleges and Universities: CDC released guidance and tools to help colleges and universities make decisions, protect their students and instructors, and communicate with their communities.

Considerations for Public Pools, Hot Tubs, and Water Playgrounds During COVID-19: As public aquatic venues open in some areas, CDC offers the following considerations for the safety of those who operate, manage, and use public pools, hot tubs, and water playgrounds.

Information for Specific Populations
Interim Recommendations for EMS and 911 Emergency Communication Centers: CDC updated guidance for all first responders, including law enforcement, fire services, emergency medical services, and emergency management officials, who anticipate close contact with persons with confirmed or possible COVID-19 in the course of their work.

COVID-19 One-Stop Shop Toolkits: CDC updated its webpage that serves as a COVID-19 one-stop shop for toolkits, videos, social media, PSAs, print resources, checklists, FAQs, and web resources.

Considerations for Non-emergency Vehicle Transportation for Tribal Communities During COVID-19: CDC updated precautions to be considered to minimize risk of spreading COVID-19 when sharing personal vehicles in tribal communities.

Handwashing and a Hand Sanitizer Quiz: CDC updated information on when and how to best wash your hands to prevent COVID-19. FDA encourages consumers to test their knowledge about the appropriate use of hand sanitizer with this hand sanitizer quiz, posted today. The quiz provides questions and answers to some of the most frequently asked questions related to hand sanitizer. This quiz can help consumers learn how to correctly use hand sanitizer.

Research Updates

Research Use Only CDC Influenza SARS-CoV-2 (Flu SC2) Multiplex Assay Real-Time RT-PCR Primers and Probes: CDC updated information on SARS-CoV-2 multiplex assay. These sequences are intended to be used for the purposes of respiratory virus surveillance and research.