

Altering Medicare Part D could harm Floridians living with HIV

The state of Florida has the highest percentage of residents aged 65 and older in the United States, with more than 4 million seniors enrolled in Medicare. Additionally, there are more than 117,000 people living with HIV in Florida, many of whom rely on the Medicare prescription drug benefit known as Part D to help pay for their treatment.

As a practicing geriatrician and HIV expert, advocating for these seniors to ensure they have access to high quality treatments through Medicare is my top priority. Unfortunately, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services recently proposed changes to Part D that would endanger my patients by limiting access to vital HIV medications.

Currently, HIV drugs classified as anti-retrovirals are considered one of the six “protected classes” of medicine. This means that Part D plans are required to cover “all or substantially all” medications within these classes without exception. The proposed changes, however, would undermine these protections and allow Part D plans to restrict the number of drugs offered under each class.

Additionally, the proposal would allow plans to impose requirements for prior authorization and step-therapy for HIV medications. Step-therapy is a harmful

practice that forces patients to prove that a cheaper medication failed to meet their needs before they are permitted to use a drug originally prescribed by their physician. This change strips doctors of their autonomy and undermines their ability to offer the medications that best fit patients’ specific needs. Step-therapy is *not* a practice endorsed by current HIV treatment guidelines.

Moreover, this dangerous proposal could lead to disruptions in treatment and significantly reduce patient adherence to treatment plans. With diseases like HIV, swift and consistent treatment is essential to ensuring the best health outcome for the patient. It also improves the broader public’s health, as patients are much less likely to transmit to others if provided regular care.

HIV used to be considered a death sentence, but medical innovations and expanded access to anti-retroviral medications have extended the lives of Americans in Florida and across the nation. Any proposal that creates barriers to access for such crucial medications strips patients of the best chances for a healthy life.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services’ restrictions to the six protected classes of medicine is truly a dangerous, irresponsible and unethical proposal that would undoubtedly harm vulnerable patients in Florida.

I encourage the administration to rethink its course of action.

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Jonathan Appelbaum Guest columnist

