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Medicare's \$30M ambulance-ride mystery

The Associated Press – September 29, 2015, By Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar

WASHINGTON (AP) — Medicare paid \$30 million for ambulance rides for which no record exists that patients got medical care at their destination, the place where they were picked up or other critical information.

The mystery ambulance rides are part of a bigger problem with Medicare payments for transporting patients, according to a federal audit being released Tuesday.

The Department of Health and Human Services' inspector general's office also found that some urban ambulance services got paid for an average distance of more than 100 miles per ride. That contrasts with a national average of just 10 miles for urban ambulance rides.

Four major metro areas seemed to be breeding grounds for ambulance schemes. Philadelphia, Los Angeles, New York and Houston accounted for about half of the questionable rides and payments. Medicare has barred new ambulance companies from joining the program in Houston and Philadelphia, and the report recommends a similar approach in certain other places.

Across the country, 1 in 5 ambulance companies had at least some questionable billings.

"Medicare payments for ambulance transports have increased in recent years, and investigators have uncovered a variety of fraud schemes involving ambulance suppliers," the report said.

The audit involves medical claims dating to the first six months of 2012, but the inspector general's office said it believes the findings reflect continuing weaknesses in Medicare's efforts against fraud. A Medicare spokesman says the agency has taken action since the auditors privately shared their findings last year.

Investigators went to great lengths to try to explain the \$30 million in mystery ambulance rides.

The report said they did not count any cases in which the patient died within a day of being transported by ambulance. On the chance that some billers might have incorrectly reported pickup and drop-off locations, auditors checked if the patient might have gotten care related to their ambulance ride at another location. They scrutinized Medicare's

inpatient, outpatient, nursing home, hospice, and physician claims databases. To account for tardy bills, they kept watch for a whole year.

In the end, they were stumped. "The transports may not have occurred," the report said. For 46 ambulance companies, there was no record that patients got medical services in more than 9 out of 10 of the rides they billed for.

Medicare has a longstanding problem with ambulance fraud, investigators said. Over the past decade or so the total cost of ambulance rides has risen sharply. Medicare's Part B, which covers outpatient care, paid \$5.8 billion for ambulance rides in 2012, almost double the amount paid in 2003.

The audit scrutinized 7.3 million ambulance rides in the first half of 2012. In addition to the mystery transports, investigators found that Medicare paid \$24 million for ambulance rides that didn't meet program requirements for payment.

In its formal response, Medicare said it has developed a comprehensive strategy to combat ambulance fraud and abuse.

A spokesman said separately that Medicare is now requiring prior approval for repeat non-emergency ambulance rides in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and South Carolina. Next year that requirement will be extended to Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia, plus Washington, D.C.

Medicare is also considering barring new ambulance companies from joining the program in fraud-prone areas.

Fraud costs the health care system tens of billions of dollars a year. Medicare is especially vulnerable because Congress requires the program to pay claims promptly in most cases. That has given rise to the frustrating condition that law enforcement officials call "pay and chase."

The inspector general recommended that Medicare use its existing legal authority to require more documentation from ambulance companies and to give its billing contractors additional options to hold off paying claims that don't seem to meet basic requirements.

<http://bigstory.ap.org/urn:publicid:ap.org:2bc14f27a3d54ba4baedbf641a5d79fd>

Modern-day slavery happening right in your backyard

Cadillac News – September 29, 2015, By Rick Charmoli

You might be shocked to know that Michigan ranks second only behind Nevada in human trafficking.

If that doesn't shock you, maybe this will: The government estimates that in West Michigan alone, there are 2,400 minors for sale at any given time, mostly on the Internet.

For those who don't know, human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery. Victims of human trafficking are subjected to force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of commercial sex or forced labor. They are young children, teenagers, men and women. Trafficking in persons occurs throughout the world, including in the United States and Michigan.

Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette is aware of the problem. According to the AG's office, human trafficking is not a choice. A person cannot consent to become enslaved. Victims want to escape but cannot. Human trafficking is not smuggling. Smuggling is transportation; trafficking is exploitation.

Representatives of the attorney general also explained that human trafficking does not require that a victim be moved over state or international borders. It is a \$32 billion global industry.

Luther Lovell said Michigan has seen human trafficking increase dramatically over the past few years. Although Lovell is the Mecosta/Osceola Michigan Department of Health and Human Services director, he also is a member of the Northern Michigan Coalition to End Human Trafficking and simply a concerned citizen.

Lovell said that two years ago, Michigan ranked 15th in the nation in human trafficking and jumped 10 spots to fifth in 2014. He added that although the attorney general's office is saying there are 2,400 minors for sale on the Internet in West Michigan, it is hard to really know exactly how many cases there are.

With that in mind, Lovell said the coalition decided to organize an event to raise awareness of human trafficking. The two-day Northern Michigan Human Trafficking Awareness Summit is scheduled for Oct. 23 and 24 and will be held at the Cherry Grove Event Center.

"What we wanted to do, whether we have one or 100 cases, we want the community to be prepared as much as possible — people don't know it exists," Lovell said. "We aren't going to be looking at solutions, but we do want to make the community aware."

Lovell said the first day of the summit is intended for the general public while the second day aims to rally the local faith-based community.

October's event won't be the first time human trafficking has been the subject of such an event.

This past weekend, the Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America held its annual conference in Tustin. The subject of the conference was services for prostituted, addicted and trafficked women.

Vince Schumacher of the Our Sisters organization was the keynote speaker. Our Sisters is working in the Grand Rapids area to create a way to help prostituted and addicted women escape "the life."

Barbara Hazlett is the anti-human trafficking chairwoman for the North/West Michigan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and helped to organize last weekend's event. She said the anti-human trafficking theme has been ongoing since July 2014.

Living in Northern Michigan, and Tustin in particular, Hazlett said she believes a lot of people are like ostriches with their heads in the sand about human trafficking, and most people in the area probably think it is something that happens in Detroit or Grand Rapids but not here.

Hazlett said thanks to groups such as Our Sisters and even the local Cadillac Area Ministerial Association, the word is starting to get out there, but more work needs to be done.

"It is sad we are not aware of it," she said. "Awareness and communication are the two things we need to promote so people know exactly what is happening."

For more information about the upcoming summit in Cadillac, go to nmicoalitiontoendht.com.

http://www.cadillacnews.com/news_story/?story_id=1829306&year=2015&issue=20150929

Gov. Snyder says action coming on Flint's water woes

Detroit Free Press – September 29, 2015, By Paul Egan

LANSING — Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder said Tuesday the drinking water situation in Flint is a serious issue and he expects the state to come forward with "action steps" by early next week.

Snyder did not answer directly when asked if he thinks the drinking water in Flint is contributing to elevated lead levels in children there.

But he told reporters "a large team of people" in state government is working hard on the Flint drinking water issue.

"During the course of the week or early next week we hopefully will be coming out with more public action steps," some of which are already under way, and others to be implemented, Snyder said.

DETROIT FREE PRESS

Shortfalls of EM law writ large in Flint water crisis

"I take it as a serious issue; the Flint water situation," Snyder said in Lansing. "Lead is a serious issue, so again, we're spending a lot of time and effort looking at this and trying to partner with the people in Flint on that issue."

Flint's drinking water has had odor and taste problems since the city, awaiting a hook-up to Lake Huron water expected next year, stopped getting its supply from the Detroit water department in 2014 and switched to the Flint River.

DETROIT FREE PRESS

Lead-poisoned Flint kids will pay price for water switch

Senate Minority Leader Jim Ananich, D-Flint, has urged Snyder to help Flint return to the Detroit water system, which also has Lake Huron as its source.

Mona Hanna-Attisha, a researcher at Flint's Hurley Medical Center, analyzed blood-lead level information collected as part of a routine screening process, and found that the percentage of Flint children with elevated blood-lead levels has increased significantly since the city started pumping water from the Flint River in April 2014. In some ZIP codes — those considered most at-risk — the percentage of kids affected by lead has doubled.

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services said the increase was "seasonal and not related to the water supply."

But a Free Press analysis found that the numbers that provide the basis for a chart the state released Thursday, indicating seasonal changes, support the Hurley data.

The Hurley data shows that percentage of kids under 5 with elevated lead-blood levels increased from 2.1% before the water supply switch to 4% after, across the city. In high-risk ZIP codes, the percentage of affected kids was larger, from 2.5% before the switch to 6.3% after.

The state's data, which includes a larger sample size of children under 16, show that before the switch to Flint River water, 2.37% of Flint kids had elevated blood-lead levels; after the switch, it was 3.21%, a significant increase not just because it's a reversal of the trend, but because it shows that a much larger percentage of Flint kids were lead-poisoned than in the previous year.

<http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/09/29/snyder-state-action-coming-flint-water/73033462/>

Potential Child Lead Poisoning Latest Twist In Flint Water Debacle

Water Online – September 29, 2015, By Sara Jerome

In some ways, the tap water problems that have plagued Flint, MI, for over a year seem to become worse with each new revelation.

"[The city's] ongoing water woes are now associated with an immediate and irreversible danger — possible lead poisoning of some of the city's children," the Detroit Free Press reported, citing an assessment of blood test results by a Hurley Children's Hospital pediatrician.

"Some doctors urged Flint to stop using the Flint River for water after finding high levels of lead in the blood of children, an extraordinary health warning in an ongoing controversy over the city's water supply," the Associated Press reported.

Mona Hanna-Attisha of Michigan State University's College of Human Medicine explained the implications of the findings.

"I was hoping not to find anything, but what we found ... is concerning," she said, per the Free Press. "This is not something you mess around with. Our population already has so many issues from poverty, from unemployment, from violence."

Flint has faced water challenges, including E. coli and high trihalomethane levels, since it stopped using Detroit's water supply over a year ago and became responsible for its own treatment processes. After the switch to Flint River water, residents began reporting "skin rashes and their hair falling out, likely caused by the chlorine used to kill the E. coli," Michigan Radio reported.

Experts employed by the state had a different take on Flint River water. Brad Wurfel, spokesman at the Department of Environmental Quality, said, per the Associated Press: "Flint's drinking water is safe in that it's meeting state and federal standards. The system has an aging portion that needs to be addressed. They haven't had meaningful maintenance for four decades or more."

Department of Health and Human Services Spokeswoman Geralyn Lasher said of the findings, per to the AP: "Our experts want a better sense of how they got there. The data that we have is a much larger set of data. We're not seeing what those numbers look like."

Tests by Virginia Tech researchers indicated that nearly 17 percent of Flint samples showed 15 ppb of lead or more. The EPA says that "if lead concentrations exceed an action level of 15 ppb...in more than 10 percent of customer taps sampled, the system must undertake a number of additional actions to control corrosion."

For additional stories, visit Water Online's Source Water Contamination Solutions Center.

<http://www.wateronline.com/doc/potential-child-lead-poisoning-latest-twist-flint-water-debacle-0001>

Study suggests Flint's water causing increased lead poisoning

Michigan Radio – September 28, 2015, Ryan Grimes

Last year, Flint ended five decades of service from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department. The city's going to take its water from a new pipeline from Lake Huron, but that won't be ready until sometime next year.

In the meantime, Flint decided that rather than continuing to pay for Detroit water, it would get its drinking water from the Flint River.

Almost immediately after making that change, residents began complaining about the way their drinking water looked, smelled and tasted. There were issues with the chemicals used to treat the river water.

And now a study performed by pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha of the Hurley Medical Center has found an increase in the number of Flint children who have been lead poisoned since the switch to the Flint River water.

Hanna-Attisha says she looked at the blood lead levels of Flint residents from before and after the switch, and noticed that the percentage of children with elevated blood lead levels just about doubled.

“Pre-switch percent of children with elevated blood (lead) levels was 2.1%, and then after the switch it was 4%,” she says.

She adds that the data for children in the rest of Genessee County, which is sticking with Detroit water until the new pipeline is ready, showed no statistical change in blood lead levels.

Even more troubling, Hanna-Attisha says that state and national data showed blood lead levels in children dropping consistently year over year before the switch due to, “great public health efforts and education efforts and lead abatement efforts.”

“Whenever you see that percentage staying the same or that percentage increasing, that is a red flag,” she says.

There has been some concern surrounding Flint’s infrastructure and how it affects the quality of the water, but Hanna-Attisha says that’s not the key factor here.

“Infrastructure has a role, but this infrastructure hasn’t changed. It was old then, it is old now, but these levels have increased. So what’s changed is... the water,” she says.

She explains that the Flint River water is more corrosive than the water from Lake Huron, so it is aging Flint’s existing water infrastructure and causing the leaching of lead from these pipes.

According to Hanna-Attisha, “mountains and mountains of research” show that lead poisoning is linked with decreased IQ, behavioral issues, ADHD-like symptoms, and higher rates of violent offenses and incarcerations.

“It’s just one of the absolute worst things that you could do for the life course of a child,” Hanna-Attisha says.

The State Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Environmental Quality and the Governor’s office have downplayed and in some cases attempted to discredit Hanna-Attisha’s findings, but she isn’t swayed.

“I think it’s fascinating, because if you look at their data, it pretty much shows the exact same thing. Every year there was a decrease in the total percentage of kids with elevated blood lead levels, and then the year after the switch it jumped up.” she says. “You can’t fight the numbers, the numbers are there, everything is consistent.”

Hanna-Attisha advises that children, formula-fed infants and pregnant mothers in the area avoid tap water.

As for everyone else, she suggests running the water for five or so minutes before using it and only using cold water for cooking.

Here's a [quick explainer](http://michiganradio.org/post/study-suggests-flints-water-causing-increased-lead-poisoning#stream/0) for those trying to get a better understanding of the complicated water issues in Flint.

<http://michiganradio.org/post/study-suggests-flints-water-causing-increased-lead-poisoning#stream/0>

Kent County has 200 low-cost shingles vaccines for underinsured

MLive – September 28, 2015, By Sue Thoms

GRAND RAPIDS, MI - The Kent County Health Department is offering shingles vaccines at minimal cost to adults who don't have insurance that covers them.

Two hundred doses of the vaccine were provided to the county from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

Although the Zostavax vaccine typically costs \$197 at the health department, the vaccines will be provided to people 60 and older for the cost of the vaccine's administrative fee — while supplies last. The fee, based on a sliding scale, tops out at \$23.

Shingles is a virus that causes a painful skin rash that can last two to four weeks and can cause nerve pain that lasts for months. It is caused by the varicella zoster virus — the same one that causes chickenpox. It lies dormant in the body and can cause shingles years later.

Anyone who recovered from chickenpox is at risk, but the risk increases with age, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

"The CDC recommends people 60 years of age or older should get a shingles vaccine," said Adam London, administrative health officer for Kent County. "Studies show that almost every American 40 years of age and up had chickenpox at some point, even if they don't remember getting it. Because the varicella-zoster virus lays dormant in your system, you can develop shingles without any warning signs."

The shingles vaccine is not recommended for the following:

- Those who experienced a life-threatening or severe allergic reaction to gelatin, the antibiotic neomycin, or any other component of shingles vaccine.
- Those with weakened immune systems because of HIV/AIDS, or who have been treated with drugs that affect the immune system (i.e. steroids, radiation or chemotherapy)
- Anyone who has been diagnosed with cancer affecting the bone marrow or lymphatic system, such as leukemia or lymphoma.
- Women who are or might be pregnant.

Vaccines are available by appointment at the health department's four clinics. Those interested can call 616.632.7200 for information.

http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2015/09/kent_county_has_200_free_shing.html

October is the time to think salmon

Midland Daily News – September 28, 2015, By Steve Griffin

Michigan salmon fans can get in on both ends of the state's program in October: visiting a facility where eggs and milt are taken to produce the next generation of coho and Chinook salmon, and/or buying surplus salmon to eat.

(Granted, it's what happens between those extremes, when salmon should fill harbors and rivers, and anglers' coolers and memories, that's seemed flaky this summer and early fall — fishing generally regarded as poor.)

Salmon typically swim upstream as far as they can before settling in to spawn; the DNR installs weirs, temporary barriers, to create such an upstream limit at which to collect fish and their eggs. Eggs go to hatcheries, and fish to market.

This fall, three weirs will offer school groups and individuals tours of egg-taking facilities: on the Boardman River in downtown Traverse City, the Little Manistee in Manistee County, and the Platte near Honor in Benzie County.

Both Chinook and coho are collected on the Boardman, Chinook on the Little Manistee, and coho on the Platte.

It's worth noting that all three of those northern Michigan locations are splendid places to visit in autumn.

Interpreters from the DNR's Carl T. Johnson Hunt and Fish Center at Cadillac will explain how salmon, weirs and fish ladders, egg collection and fish hatcheries, and invasive species all interact in the complex Great Lakes fisheries and ecosystem. The DNR says its tour programs tie in components of history, ecology, biology and stewardship.

Boardman River Weir tours are expected to run through mid-October, at various times on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays and, for groups, by appointment.

The Platte River facility plans its tours during egg-taking for October 14-16 and October 19-20, with more tours on Saturdays and Sundays.

The Little Manistee weir plans to take eggs October 5-9, with public tours each day; the schedule could vary based on fish readiness, so it's best to call and confirm on the weir hotline at 231-775-9727, ext. 6072.

I'd double-check with the Platte (231-325-4611) and Boardman (231-922-5280) facilities, too. Fall's a great time for a drive, but why chance disappointment? To schedule a tour at any of the locations, visit michigan.gov/huntfishcenter and click on the facility under the "School Group Programs" section.

Weirs send eggs to hatcheries – and some of the weir-harvested egg providers to market for public sale. American-Canadian Fisheries, the contractor harvesting salmon for the DNR, pays the agency a flat per-pound rate, then directs salmon products into human and pet food, and bait and caviar markets.

(The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services does recommend caution when eating certain kinds and sizes of fish from Michigan lakes and streams; check out the Eat Safe Fish Guide available online at michigan.gov/eatsafefish or by contacting MDHHS at 1-800-648-6942.)

Michigan retailers selling salmon harvested at DNR weirs include: Andy's Tackle Box, Brethren; AuSable River Store, Oscoda; Hank and Sons, Brethren; Lixie's Fish Market, East Tawas; R&J Resort, Brethren; Tippy Dam Campground, Wellston; and Wellman's Bait & Tackle, Oscoda.

Any of them, like any of the weirs, could be a good destination for an early-fall road trip.

http://www.ourmidland.com/sports/griffin-october-is-the-time-to-think-salmon/article_38327942-b16c-5ead-a211-2082f5d51cc9.html
