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The pandemic's origins, the first home test for covid and flu, abortion access, tobacco oversight, maternity care, and more are in the news.

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Morning Briefing: Get All The Health News

Monday, February 27, 2023

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NOTE TO READERS

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From Kaiser Health News:

Kaiser Health News Original Stories

[1. After Capping Insulin Copays, Colorado Sets Its Sights on EpiPens](#)

Colorado's proposed legislation to cap the copay for the EpiPen is part of a nationwide trend as more states try to shield patients from skyrocketing drug prices. (Helen Santoro, 2/27)

[2. California Explores Private Insurance for Immigrants Lacking Legal Status. But Is It Affordable?](#)

Nearly half a million Californians without legal residency make too much to qualify for Medicaid yet they can't afford to buy coverage. A state lawmaker is proposing to open up the state's health insurance exchange as a first step to providing them affordable insurance. (Rachel Bluth, 2/27)

[3. Dementia Care Programs Help, If Caregivers Can Find Them](#)

Programs assisting people with dementia — and their caregivers — improve quality of life and care. But millions of unpaid family and friend caregivers may not know where or how to find help. (Judith Graham, 2/27)

[4. Readers and Tweepers Urgently Plea for a Proper 'Role' Call in the ER](#)

KHN gives readers a chance to comment on a recent batch of stories. (2/27)

Here's today's health policy haiku:

FINANCING ENTITLEMENTS

Critical programs:
SSA and Medicare
Need higher taxes!

- Paul Hughes-Cromwick

If you have a health policy haiku to share, please [Contact Us](#) and let us know if we can include your name. Haikus follow the format of 5-7-5 syllables. We give extra brownie points if you link back to a KHN original story.

Opinions expressed in haikus and cartoons are solely the author's and do not reflect the opinions of KHN or KFF.

Summaries Of The News:

Covid-19 Crisis

[5. Energy Department Shifts Assessment On Covid Origins To 'Likely' Lab Leak](#)

In a classified intelligence document reported by The Wall Street Journal, the Department of

Energy revised its undecided position on the source of the covid pandemic to "likely" originating from an unintentional lab leak in China. The report joins a mix of U.S. intelligence agency judgments on covid's origins.

[The Wall Street Journal: A Lab Leak In China Most Likely Origin Of Covid Pandemic, Energy Department Says](#)

The U.S. Energy Department has concluded that the Covid pandemic most likely arose from a laboratory leak, according to a classified intelligence report recently provided to the White House and key members of Congress. The shift by the Energy Department, which previously was undecided on how the virus emerged, is noted in an update to a 2021 document by Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines's office. (Gordon and Strobel, 2/26)

[The New York Times: Lab Leak Most Likely Caused Pandemic, Energy Dept. Says](#)

Some officials briefed on the intelligence said that it was relatively weak and that the Energy Department's conclusion was made with "low confidence," suggesting its level of certainty was not high. While the department shared the information with other agencies, none of them changed their conclusions, officials said. Officials would not disclose what the intelligence was. But many of the Energy Department's insights come from its network of national laboratories, some of which conduct biological research, rather than more traditional forms of intelligence like spy networks or communications intercepts. (Barnes, 2/26)

[The Hill: What We Know About Energy Department's COVID Lab Leak Conclusion](#)

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan on Sunday responded to the WSJ report, saying the intelligence community hasn't come up with a "definitive answer" on the question. "There is a variety of views in the intelligence community. Some elements of the intelligence community have reached conclusions on one side, some on the other. A number of them have said they just don't have enough information to be sure," Sullivan said. (Mueller, 2/26)

[Axios: New COVID Lab Leak Assessment Reignites Furor Over Pandemic Origins](#)

A new U.S. government assessment that COVID-19 likely originated from a lab leak in China has ignited yet another round of political furor around the issue, adding to many Republicans' anger over how the pandemic was handled even as many scientists remain convinced the virus most likely originated naturally. (Reed, Owens and Bettelheim, 2/27)

[NBC News: U.S. Energy Department Assesses With 'Low Confidence' Covid May Have Originated From Chinese Lab Leak](#)

Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, called Sunday for "extensive public hearings" if the U.S. intelligence community conclusively determines that Covid-19 leaked from a Chinese laboratory. Asked on NBC News' "Meet the Press" what the consequences should be if the U.S. makes that determination and then discovers it was covered up by the Chinese government, Sullivan said lawmakers must first "have public hearings on this and really dig into it." (Tsirkin, Alba, Roecker, Talbot and Edelman, 2/26)

[6. 'Major Milestone': First Home Test For Covid And Flu Authorized By FDA](#)

The FDA approved Friday an emergency use authorization for the first at-home test that can simultaneously detect both covid and the two most common flu strains in 30 minutes. It's developed by Lucira Health — which filed for bankruptcy last week — and is a nasal swab similar to other rapid kits people have become used to during the pandemic.

[NPR: FDA Authorizes The First At-Home Test For COVID And The Flu](#)

The Food and Drug Administration issued an emergency use authorization on Friday for the first at-home test that can simultaneously detect both COVID-19 and the flu. With a shallow nasal swab, the single-use kit can provide results within 30 minutes indicating whether a person is positive or negative for COVID, as well as influenza A and influenza B, which are two common strains of the flu. (Kim, 2/25)

[Stat: The FDA Has Cleared The First Home Flu And Covid Test — But Its Maker Just Declared Bankruptcy](#)

On Friday, the Food and Drug Administration issued an emergency authorization for the first at-home test that can detect flu and Covid-19 — but for the test's maker, Lucira, the long-anticipated authorization may have taken too long. The company filed for bankruptcy on Feb. 22, directly blaming the "protracted" FDA authorization process for the over-the-counter combination test for its financial troubles. (Trang, 2/26)

On vaccines and covid treatments —

[Fox News: CDC Advisory Group Finds Insufficient Evidence To Recommend More Than One COVID-19 Booster A Year](#)

A US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advisory group said Friday it isn't recommending more than one annual coronavirus vaccine booster. The working committee, which is part of the CDC's Advisory Committee For Immunization Practices, found insufficient evidence that more than one shot a year would benefit older or immunocompromised people. (Stimson, 2/24)

[NBC News: Nasal Covid Vaccine Shows Promise In Early Clinical Trial](#)

The vaccine, developed by a startup called Blue Lake Biotechnology Inc., was found to reduce the risk of symptomatic Covid infections by 86% for three months in people who received it as a booster dose. Existing booster shots in the United States reduce symptomatic infections by 43% in people 18 to 49 over one to two months, according to a study published in November by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (Chow, 2/24)

[Reuters: Pfizer/BioNTech Apply For Full FDA Approval Of Updated COVID Vaccine](#)

Pfizer Inc and its German partner BioNTech SE said on Friday they filed an application to the U.S Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for a full approval of their Omicron-adapted COVID-19 vaccine. The companies are seeking approval of the updated vaccine both as a primary course and a booster dose for individuals 12 years of age and above. (2/24)

[The Washington Post: Doctors Who Touted Ivermectin As Covid Fix Now Pushing It For Flu, RSV](#)

First, the group of doctors championed ivermectin as a covid panacea. It failed to live up to the hype. Now, they're promoting the anti-parasitic to prevent and treat the flu and RSV. The Front Line Covid-19 Critical Care Alliance, formed in 2020 to "prevent and treat covid," is touting ivermectin for common respiratory infections amid a dramatic drop in prescriptions for the drug as clinical trials undermined claims of its efficacy against covid. (Weber, 2/26)

[Bloomberg: Merck's Covid-19 Pill Gets Negative Recommendation In EU](#)

Merck & Co.'s Covid-19 pill received a negative recommendation from a European Union regulatory committee, a blow to efforts to gain clearance for marketing the medicine in the bloc. (Lauerman and Muller, 2/24)

More on the spread of covid —

[San Francisco Chronicle: XBB.1.5 Now Makes Up 85% Of U.S. Cases](#)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the XBB.1.5 omicron subvariant made up about 85% of U.S. COVID-19 cases in the week through Feb. 25, up from 74.7% of cases sequenced in the week ending Feb. 11. The BQ.1.1 and BQ.1 omicron subvariants together accounted for 12% of new cases, down from 20.4% two weeks ago. (Vaziri, 2/24)

[San Francisco Chronicle: Nearly 80% Of U.S. Counties Have Low Virus Levels](#)

About 77.58% of all U.S. counties have low COVID-19 community levels, according to updated figures from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That is the largest proportion of people in that tier in nearly nine months. Another 20.34% have medium levels, and 2.08% have high levels. (Vaziri, 2/24)

[The Baltimore Sun: 'It's Not Over': The State May Be Closing Its Baltimore Mass Testing And Vaccination Site, But COVID Fight Continues](#)

They've been in the trenches together for the past several years and soon would move on. The war might not be over, but this phase was. "It's bittersweet," Dr. Mindy Kantsiper said Friday as she surveyed the state's largely empty COVID testing, treatment and vaccination site in Baltimore. She and Dr. Charles "Chuck" Callahan, who together led the site, visited and reminisced with staff in advance of its closing Saturday. There were hugs and reflections of a time when supplies were limited and long lines of people circled the temporary facility on a parking lot at the State Center complex in Midtown Baltimore. (Marbella and Roberts, 2/26)

[San Francisco Chronicle: GOP Senator Who Opposed Pandemic Aid Retired Due To Long COVID](#)

Oklahoma lawmaker Jim Inhofe earlier this month told his local newspaper, Tulsa World, that he has retired from the Senate because he is suffering from long COVID, which severely limits his daily activities. The former Republican congressman who voted against multiple coronavirus aid packages at the height of the pandemic, including the Families First

Coronavirus Response Act in March 2020 and the American Rescue Plan in March 2021, spent nearly 40 years in the federal government, most frequently as a foil to Democrat Barbara Boxer. (Vaziri, 2/24)

Outbreaks and Health Threats

[7. Stomach Bug Shigella Is Increasingly Drug Resistant, Warns CDC](#)

News outlets cover a new warning from the CDC concerning a rise of serious gastrointestinal infections from the Shigella bacteria, which seems to be increasingly resistant to common antibiotics. Bird flu and Naegleria fowleri are also in the news.

[The Washington Post: CDC Issues Warning About Rise In Highly Drug-Resistant Stomach Bug](#)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is warning clinicians and public health departments about a sharp rise in serious gastrointestinal infections caused by bacteria that are resistant to common antibiotics. In a health advisory issued Friday, the CDC said the agency has been monitoring an increase in people infected with strains of Shigella bacteria that are highly resistant to available drugs. Shigella infections, known as shigellosis, usually cause diarrhea that can be prolonged and bloody, as well as fever and abdominal cramps. (Sun, 2/25)

[Fox News: CDC Issues Alert About Drug-Resistant Stomach Bug's Spread](#)

There are about 450,000 shigellosis infections every year. The CDC reports that 5% of all infections in 2022 were extensively drug-resistant, or XDR, up from zero in 2015. An infection is considered extensively drug-resistant when it doesn't respond to antibiotics that are commonly used to treat it, such as azithromycin, ciprofloxacin, ceftriaxone, and others. (Best, 2/26)

On bird flu —

[Reuters: Viruses In Cambodian Bird Flu Cases Identified As Endemic Clade](#)

The viruses that infected two people in Cambodia with H5N1 avian influenza have been identified as an endemic clade of bird flu circulating in the country, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said. The cases reported last week had raised concerns they were caused by a new strain of H5N1, clade 2.3.4.4b, which emerged in 2020 and has caused record numbers of deaths among wild birds and domestic poultry in recent months. But work so far suggests this is not the case. (2/26)

[AP: Experts Say Bird Flu Threat Small Despite Cambodian Fatality](#)

A top World Health Organization official, reacting to the death of an 11-year-old girl in Cambodia infected by bird flu, said Friday the recent global spread of the virus and human infections are “worrying.” Dr. Sylvie Briand, the WHO’s director for epidemic and pandemic preparedness and prevention, said the U.N. agency is “in close communication with the Cambodian authorities to understand more about the outbreak.” (Cheang and Peck, 2/24)

[Reuters: Analysis: Why Public Health Officials Are Not Panicked About Bird Flu](#)

The very changes that have allowed the virus to infect wild birds so efficiently likely made it harder to infect human cells, leading disease experts told Reuters. Their views underpin global health officials' assessments that the current outbreak of H5N1 poses low risk to people. The new strain, called H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b, emerged in 2020 and has spread to many parts of Africa, Asia and Europe as well as North and South America, causing unprecedented numbers of deaths among wild birds and domestic poultry. (Steenhuysen, 2/24)

On Naegleria fowleri —

[WGCU: Health Department Lists Brain-Eating Amoeba Case In Charlotte County](#)

The Florida Department of Health in Charlotte has confirmed that one person was recently infected with Naegleria fowleri, possibly as a result of sinus rinse practices utilizing tap water. (2/24)

After Roe V. Wade

[8. Federal Judge: Funds For Out-Of-Texas Abortions Are Safe From Prosecutors](#)

U.S. District Judge Robert Pitman in Austin ruled Friday that local prosecutors in Texas can't use state laws to prosecute organizations that help fund and arrange abortions for Texans in other states where they are legal. The Texas Tribune tempers the news with the words "likely safe," however.

[Reuters: Texas Prosecutors Can't Target Groups That Fund Out-Of-State Abortions, Judge Says](#)

Local prosecutors in Texas cannot use state laws that are more than 60 years old to prosecute organizations that help fund and arrange travel for Texans to obtain abortions in other states where it is legal, a federal judge ruled Friday. U.S. District Judge Robert Pitman in Austin said that 1961 state abortion laws, which were rendered unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 ruling in Roe v. Wade establishing a nationwide right to abortion, were not revived when the Supreme Court overturned Roe last June. (Pierson, 2/24)

[The Texas Tribune: Federal Judge Rules Texas Abortion Funds Likely Safe From Prosecution](#)

A federal judge issued a favorable ruling for Texas abortion funds, indicating they likely cannot be criminally charged for helping people travel out of state to terminate their pregnancies. (Klibanoff, 2/24)

On the upcoming ruling on abortion pills —

[Stat: A Dozen States Sue The FDA In Hopes Of Easing Abortion Pill Restrictions](#)

In the latest flare up over access to the abortion pill, a dozen states filed a lawsuit to force the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to ease restrictions on how mifepristone is prescribed and made available to patients. At issue is a risk mitigation program, which is used to ensure certain prescription medicines considered to carry significant risks are prescribed and taken safely. (Silverman, 2/24)

[Stat: Harris: Abortion Pill Case Could Take Away 'Constitutional Right'](#)

A looming Texas court decision on abortion pills could impact nationwide access to medication, Vice President Kamala Harris warned Friday, as she described abortion access as a "constitutional right." (Owermohle, 2/24)

[The Washington Post: The Texas Judge Who Could Take Down The Abortion Pill](#)

Matthew Kacsmatyk was a 22-year-old law student when he drove to a small city in west Texas to spend a day with a baby he would probably never see again. He was in Abilene to support his sister, who, pregnant at 17, had fled to a faraway maternity home to avoid the scorn she feared from their Christian community. But holding his nephew in his arms — then leaving the baby with adoptive parents — also solidified Kacsmatyk's belief that every pregnancy should be treasured, his sister recalled, even those that don't fit neatly into a family's future plans. (Kitchener and Marimow, 2/25)

In other abortion developments —

[Wyoming Public Radio: Two Bills Restricting Abortion Move Forward In Legislature After Two Weeks Of No Action](#)

Two bills related to limiting access to abortion were introduced to their second house of chambers committees and passed on Thursday, Feb. 23, just one day short of the deadline to come out of its second house committee. Although both passed with recommended amendments. (Kudelska, 2/25)

[The Guardian: Louisiana Anti-Abortion Group Calls On Doctors To Stop Denying Care Exempted By Ban](#)

An influential group in Louisiana that has long opposed abortion access is calling out medical providers and their legal advisers who – for an apparent fear of liability – have cited the state's ban on most abortions to deny treatments that remain legal. The group spoke out after hospitals in the state's capital, Baton Rouge, refused to provide treatments for a woman who had a near deadly miscarriage. ... In a recent interview with the Guardian, Sarah Zagorski of Louisiana Right for Life said the public in general urgently needs more education on the exceptions to the abortion ban in a state which has the highest maternal mortality rate in the US. (Wolfe, 2/26)

[Seattle Times: She Secretly Traveled 2,000 Miles For Her WA Abortion. Why Patients From The South Are Coming Here](#)

The Texas woman's apartment has thin walls. Could neighbors hear her talking about her

imminent flight to Washington for an abortion? Or could data from her phone be tracked, revealing she had searched for a way to end her pregnancy? “And then, like, all of a sudden somebody shows up at my door.” “Maybe that’s a little bit extreme,” the woman, who agreed to be identified only by the initial A., said of her imagined scenario. “But also, maybe nooot?” She drew out the word as she considered the question aloud. (Shapiro, 2/26)

Pharmaceuticals

[9. FDA To Overhaul Its Oversight Of Tobacco, Nicotine Products](#)

Roll Call notes the Food and Drug Administration's changes come in response to a report critical of its rules regarding oversight and e-cigarette reviews. FDA Commissioner Robert Califf also spoke on the benefits of e-cigarettes over traditional tobacco products.

[Roll Call: FDA Plans Oversight Changes After Critical Tobacco Report](#)

The Food and Drug Administration on Friday announced a series of actions meant to improve its oversight of tobacco and nicotine products, most notably e-cigarettes. FDA Commissioner Robert Califf outlined plans for better communication and transparency on product reviews, increased use of the tobacco advisory committee and intra-agency meetings on enforcement. (Clason, 2/24)

[Stat: FDA's Top Tobacco Official Talks Benefits Of E-Cigs Over Cigarettes](#)

The head of the FDA's tobacco center wants to do more to tout the health benefits of switching from cigarettes to e-cigarettes, now that youth vaping rates are declining. “With the reductions in [youth vaping rates] that we’ve seen, we’ve got an opportunity to ramp up our efforts related to the continuum of risk,” said Brian King, director of the FDA's Center for Tobacco Products, at a Friday event. “I am wholly open to enhanced efforts by the Center for Tobacco Products to message not only on the continuum of risk, but also misperceptions related to nicotine.” (Florko, 2/24)

On marijuana use —

[Fortune: Daily Marijuana Users Are More Likely To Take This Health Hit, A New Study Finds](#)

Those who use marijuana daily are about a third more likely to develop coronary artery disease than those who’ve never used the recreational drug, according to a new study. “There are probably certain harms of cannabis use that weren’t recognized before, and people should take that into account,” Dr. Ishan Paranjpe, a physician at Stanford University and lead author, said in a news release about the study, which will be presented in early March at the American College of Cardiology conference. (Prater, 2/24)

[St. Louis Post-Dispatch: Smoking Weed Is Legal In Missouri Now. But Your Surgeon May Not Approve](#)

Expect to be asked more about cannabis use — what type, how much and how often — when preparing for an upcoming surgery as researchers learn more about complications associated with marijuana and anesthesia. New U.S. guidelines released in January say all patients undergoing procedures that require going under should be asked details about their marijuana consumption. That’s because regular users may require more anesthesia and experience worse pain and nausea after surgery, according to research gathered as part of developing the first-ever guidelines for anesthesiologists when it comes to patients’ cannabis use. (Munz, 2/26)

In other pharmaceutical news —

[Fox News: Biden Admin To Limit Telehealth Prescriptions For Some Controlled Drugs](#)

The Biden administration is moving to require patients to be evaluated by a physician in person before receiving prescriptions for some controlled medications, including Adderall and OxyContin. The proposal would reverse a policy enacted during the coronavirus pandemic that allowed doctors to prescribe these medications through telehealth appointments. The move will make it more difficult for Americans to access some drugs used for treating pain and mental health disorders. (Mion, 2/26)

[Stateline: Addiction Treatment May Be Coming To A Pharmacy Near You](#)

Despite an overdose epidemic that killed 107,000 people last year, nearly 9 in 10 Americans who need medication to treat their addiction to deadly opioids aren’t receiving it. Surprising

new results from a first-of-its-kind study in Rhode Island could hold a key to getting addiction medication to more people who need it: allowing patients to get prescriptions at their local pharmacy rather than a doctor's office. The change would particularly help those with low incomes who lack housing and transportation, the study found. (Vestal, 2/24)

[The Wall Street Journal: Pfizer In Talks To Acquire Seagen In Deal Likely Valued At More Than \\$30 Billion](#)

Pfizer Inc. is in talks to acquire biotech Seagen Inc., according to people familiar with the matter, the latest potential deal for a big drug company aimed at adding a promising class of targeted cancer therapies. The talks are at an early stage and there is no guarantee there will be a deal, the people said. A number of hurdles would need to be overcome, including the potential for a stringent antitrust review of any proposal. If there is a deal, it would be big: Seagen has a market value of some \$30 billion and would be expected to command a premium over that. (Hopkins and Rockoff, 2/26)

[Stat: U.S. Trade Rep Urged Not To Sanction Countries If They Sidestep Patents On Vertex Cystic Fibrosis Drugs](#)

Several leading advocacy groups are asking the U.S. trade representative not to sanction or pressure four countries — Brazil, Ukraine, South Africa, and India — if the governments grant requests from cystic fibrosis patients to sidestep or revoke patents on a pricey medicine. (Silverman, 2/25)

[KHN: After Capping Insulin Copays, Colorado Sets Its Sights on EpiPens](#)

Almost four years after becoming the first state to cap insulin prices, Colorado may limit what consumers pay for epinephrine autoinjectors, also known as EpiPens, which treat serious allergic reactions. A proposed state law would cap out-of-pocket copayments at \$60 for a two-pack of epinephrine autoinjectors. In 2007, the wholesale price of a single EpiPen was about \$47. Today, two brand-name autoinjectors cost just under \$636 at a Walgreens in Denver, according to GoodRx. At some pharmacies a generic pen sells for \$100 to \$200, which is still expensive for many people. (Santoro, 2/27)

[Stat: Little Transparency, Lots Of Waste: NIH Funds Pediatric Research, But Many Trials Results Go Unpublished](#)

The National Institutes of Health provided \$362 million in grants for clinical trials that enrolled at least 41,000 children over a recent three-year period — but many results were never published, a new analysis found. The results are a worrisome sign of a lack of transparency that can lead to wasted research funding. (Silverman, 2/24)

Health Industry

[10. Focus On Rural Hospitals As More Close Their Maternity Units](#)

The state of the country's rural hospitals is in the spotlight as news media cover the shuttering of maternity units, the impact that rural hospital closures can have, and a "lifeline" effort by Missouri Rep. Sam Graves, a Republican.

[The New York Times: Rural Hospitals Are Shuttering Their Maternity Units](#)

Three days before Christmas, the only hospital in this remote city on the Yakama Indian Reservation abruptly closed its maternity unit without consulting the community, the doctors who delivered babies there or even its own board. At least 35 women were planning to give birth at Astria Toppenish Hospital in January alone, and the sudden closure — which violated the hospital's commitment to the state to maintain critical services in this rural area — threw their plans into disarray. (Rabin, 2/26)

[North Carolina Health News: Five Years Later, Residents Still Mourn The Loss Of Angel Medical Center's Maternity Unit](#)

Before the sun rises on a Tuesday morning in December, Amelia Cline smooches her partner goodbye and heads out the back door of her house in West Asheville. With a thermos of coffee in one hand and a handful of medical supplies in the other, she climbs into the driver's side of a white Toyota and settles in for her hour-ish drive to Macon County. (Donnelly-DeRoven, 2/27)

[St. Joseph \(Mo.\) News-Press: Missouri Congressman Seeks A Lifeline For Rural Hospitals](#)

When it comes to living in rural America, open roads and empty spaces are part of the appeal.

But someone who needs lifesaving care can find those small-town blessings to be a curse when rural hospitals are fighting for their survival. Now U.S. Rep. Sam Graves wants to throw a lifeline. Along with Rep. Jared Huffman, a Democrat from California, Graves is co-sponsoring a bill that would end Medicare cuts for rural providers, cement COVID-era telemedicine provisions into existing regulations and boost reimbursement for rural ambulance services. (Kozol, 2/25)

In related hospital news —

[Stat: Antitrust Officials Consider Letting Physician-Owned Hospitals Expand](#)

Some government antitrust regulators are hinting at their support for expanding physician-owned hospitals, another sign of the Biden administration's increasing scrutiny of consolidation among the nation's health systems. (Wilkerson, 2/27)

[Stat: Hospitals' Investment Income Perked Up At End Of 2022](#)

Large hospital systems' investments rebounded heavily in the final quarter of 2022, according to a new STAT analysis of financial filings. It wasn't enough to erase the steep investment losses from the rest of the year, but the income provides extra cushion to hospitals that are still losing money from the daily operations of treating patients. (Herman and Bannow, 2/27)

In other health care industry news —

[AP: NTSB Says Medical Plane Apparently Broke Apart Before Crash](#)

A medical transport flight that crashed in a mountainous area in northern Nevada, killing five all five people aboard the plane including a patient, apparently broke apart before hitting the ground, authorities said Sunday. The National Transportation Safety Board has sent in a seven-member team of investigators to the site of Friday night's crash near Stagecoach. (2/27)

[St. Louis Public Radio: St. Louis Leaders To Keep Fighting Homer G. Phillips Hospital](#)

St. Louis nurses, activists and religious leaders are determined to keep fighting developer Paul McKee's use of Homer G. Phillips' name for a three-bed north St. Louis health center. Community leaders gathered at Beloved Community United Methodist Church on Saturday to object to McKee's efforts. Homer G. Phillips Nurses' Alumni Inc. filed a lawsuit against the developer last year arguing he has no right to use Phillip's name and claiming the center infringes on a trademark filed by the alumni group. (Davis, 2/26)

[Bloomberg: Photodisinfection Uses Lasers To Cut Post-Surgery Infections](#)

Surgery is one of the leading ways patients acquire infections in hospitals, and their noses are a major part of the problem. Germs in the nasal passages can travel to the site of an incision and cause minor skin infections or even sepsis and death. To reduce the risk, a company based in Vancouver is commercializing a way to zap those bugs right before an operation. (Pham, 2/24)

[USA Today: ChatGPT And Medicine: How Will It Affect Medical Diagnosis, Doctors?](#)

Now, ChatGPT and similar language processing tools promise to upend medical care again, providing patients with more data than a simple online search and explaining conditions and treatments in language nonexperts can understand. For clinicians, these chatbots might provide a brainstorming tool, guard against mistakes and relieve some of the burden of filling out paperwork, which could alleviate burnout and allow more facetime with patients. (Weintraub, 2/26)

Environmental Health

[11. As Officials Insist Air Is Safe, Residents Near Ohio Train Incident Fall Ill](#)

NBC News says residents and workers near the derailment site have been diagnosed with bronchitis and other conditions that doctors "suspect" are linked to chemical exposure. Meanwhile, CBS News reports that environmental officials insist outdoor air quality remains normal.

[NBC News: Residents Near Ohio Derailment Diagnosed With Bronchitis Due To Chemicals](#)

Residents and workers near the site where a train carrying hazardous chemicals derailed this month have been diagnosed with bronchitis and other conditions that doctors and nurses

suspect are linked to chemical exposure. (Bendix and Victoria Lozano, 2/25)

[The Washington Post: East Palestine Air Pollutants Raise Health Concerns, Researchers Say](#)

Three weeks after the toxic train derailment in Ohio, an independent analysis of Environmental Protection Agency data has found nine air pollutants at levels that, if they persist, could raise long-term health concerns in and around East Palestine. The analysis by Texas A&M University researchers stands in contrast to statements by state and federal regulators that air near the crash site is completely safe, despite residents complaining about rashes, breathing problems and other health effects. (Dance, 2/24)

[CBS News: Environmental Officials Insist Air Quality In East Palestine Remains Normal](#)

Environmental officials said Sunday that residential and outdoor air quality levels in East Palestine, Ohio, remained normal, just days after a town hall where frustrated residents and activists continued to demand answers on what chemicals they have been exposed to after the toxic train derailment earlier this month. (2/26)

[AP: After Ohio Train Wreck, Biden Orders Door-To-Door Checks](#)

President Joe Biden on Friday directed federal agencies to go door-to-door in East Palestine, Ohio, to check on families affected by the toxic train derailment that has morphed into a heated political controversy. Under Biden's order, teams from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Environmental Protection Agency and Federal Emergency Management Agency will visit homes beginning Saturday. Workers will ask how residents are doing, see what they need and connect them with appropriate resources from government and nonprofit organizations, the White House said. (Daly and Amiri, 2/24)

[The Washington Post: Ohio Train Derailment Waste Grows As EPA Struggles To Find Disposal Sites](#)

Following a one-day pause for federal authorities to take over operations, officials announced Sunday they can continue removing contaminated waste from the site of the toxic train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio — a city with residents eager for this nightmare to be over. Since the train derailed three weeks ago, Norfolk Southern has handled the disposal of contaminated materials. That changed Friday when the Environmental Protection Agency paused shipments to ensure all the sites receiving waste were certified by the EPA and that travel routes adhered to federal law, said Debra Shore, the EPA's regional administrator. (Brasch, 2/26)

[Houston Chronicle: EPA Pausing The Disposal Of Toxic Waste Headed To Houston Area](#)

The disposal of toxic waste from the East Palestine, Ohio, train derailment fire into Houston and Harris County will be paused, U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee announced Saturday afternoon. The federal Environmental Protection Agency is pausing the disposal of an estimated 1.1 million gallons of hazardous waste into a disposal facility in Harris County days after local leaders reassured residents they were monitoring the situation. (Limehouse, 2/25)

State Watch

[12. Abrupt Nursing Home Closures In Massachusetts Strain Families, Market](#)

Four nursing homes in Western Massachusetts will be closing this spring, the Boston Globe reports, forcing families to "scramble" to find alternatives in an already congested market. Also in the news, an environmental cleanup matter in California, how millions on Medicaid will lose coverage, and more.

[The Boston Globe: 'It's Flooding An Already Completely Congested Market.' Nursing Home Closures In Western Mass. Leave Families And Hospitals Scrambling](#)

The abrupt announcement that four nursing homes in Western Massachusetts will be closing this spring has forced hundreds of people to scramble to find alternative facilities for their fragile family members. (Lazar, 2/25)

[San Francisco Chronicle: HHS Chief Becerra Tours Laguna Honda, Says 'Stay Tuned' On Its Fate](#)

Like adversaries seeking detente, both sides in the conflict over the fate of San Francisco's Laguna Honda nursing home met Friday and walked together through the beleaguered facility that is home to 550 frail and low-income city residents. (Asimov, 2/24)

In other news from California —

[Los Angeles Times: California Toxics Agency Vows Improvements On Exide Cleanup](#)

The head of the state agency overseeing toxic substances said it must radically improve communication with residents living near the former Exide battery recycling plant in Vernon, where it is pursuing the largest environmental cleanup in California history. (Garrison, 2/24)

[Axios: Schools Unprepared To Help Asian American Students Navigate Racial Trauma](#)

The first two months of the year have left Asian Americans reeling as they attempt to reconcile their reality with a seemingly unending string of violence — and many are homing in on the lack of mental health care available to some of their most vulnerable. (Chen and Doherty, 2/25)

[KHN: California Explores Private Insurance For Immigrants Lacking Legal Status. But Is It Affordable?](#)

A doctor found cysts in Lilia Becerril's right breast five years ago, but the 51-year-old lacks health insurance. She said she can't afford the imaging to find out if they're cancerous. Becerril earns about \$52,000 a year at a nonprofit in California's Central Valley, putting her and her husband, Armando, at more than double the limit to qualify for Medi-Cal, the state's Medicaid program for people with low incomes and disabilities. Private insurance would cost \$1,230 a month in premiums, money needed for their mortgage. (Bluth, 2/27)

More health news from across the U.S. —

[Axios: Why Millions On Medicaid May Lose Coverage This Year](#)

Millions of people who rely on Medicaid coverage may be removed from the program over the next year. Under the COVID public health emergency, the federal government required state Medicaid agencies to provide coverage, even if an individual's eligibility changed. (Doherty, 2/26)

[Axios: What To Know About SNAP Benefits Returning To Pre-Pandemic Amounts](#)

The temporary boost to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits put into place during the COVID-19 pandemic will end this week. The end of the emergency allotments aimed at combating food insecurity will impact more than 41 million Americans who received the increased benefit last year alone. (Habeshian, 2/25)

Public Health

[13. Majority Say Government, Businesses Don't Value Citizens' Well-Being](#)

An Axios-Ipsos poll shows results critical of the government and businesses in the U.S., with most people certain their health and well-being are not a priority — with mental health issues a primary concern. Among other news, rising nonalcoholic fatty liver disease, the obesity crisis, and more.

[Axios: Axios-Ipsos Poll: Americans Say Their Well-Being Isn't Made A Priority](#)

The majority of Americans surveyed in the new Axios-Ipsos American Health Index say businesses and the government don't make citizens' health and well-being a priority. Mental health is a top concern for Americans — as parents, employers and leaders. (Snyder, 2/24)

In other health and wellness news —

[CIDRAP: Cancer Screenings In US Didn't Rebound From COVID Disruptions In 2021](#)

Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, US cancer screening rates still hadn't recovered to pre-crisis levels, putting millions at risk for missed diagnoses, according to a study published yesterday in the Journal of Clinical Oncology. (Van Beusekom, 2/24)

[USA Today: Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease Is Rising In Hispanic People, Kids](#)

Two years ago, Allison Grainger went to her doctor after feeling constant fatigue and nausea. A quick trip to the grocery store would exhaust her. The lethargy was so intense, the 26-year-old quit her job working as a spa concierge. Her primary care doctor sent her to a specialist, who found abnormal levels on her liver function tests. A liver biopsy later showed she had nonalcoholic steatohepatitis, or NASH, a more severe form of nonalcoholic fatty liver disease that occurs when there's too much fat in the liver. (Hassanein, 2/25)

[ABC News: Obesity Crisis Is Worsening Heart Disease Risks During And After Pregnancy: Experts](#)

Growing rates of obesity are contributing to more heart disease risks during and after pregnancy, experts warn. People with obesity are more at risk of potentially lethal pregnancy complications like diabetes, hypertension, and pre-eclampsia. Those conditions increase the risk of heart disease and stroke, according to a recent report from the American Heart Association — a major concern, because heart disease is already the leading cause of pregnancy-related deaths. (Dastmalchi, 2/27)

[NBC News: Beating Insomnia For A Healthier Heart: How Improving Sleep Quality Can Lower Risk](#)

A pair of studies released this week at a leading cardiology conference found that while insomnia may raise the risk of having a heart attack, consistent high quality sleep habits could add years to your life. People with insomnia are 69% more likely to have a heart attack, compared to those who do not have the sleep disorder, according to a new analysis of previous research presented Friday at the American College of Cardiology's annual conference. (Carroll, 2/24)

[The New York Times: Why Aren't Doctors Screening Older Americans For Anxiety?](#)

Susan Tilton's husband, Mike, was actually in good health. But after a friend's husband developed terminal cancer, she began to worry that Mike would soon die, too. At night, "I'd lie down and start thinking about it," recalled Ms. Tilton, 72, who lives in Clayton, Mo. "What would I do? What would I do?" The thought of life without her husband — they'd married at 17 and 18 — left her sleepless and dragging through the next day. (Span, 2/26)

[KHN: Dementia Care Programs Help, If Caregivers Can Find Them](#)

There's no cure, yet, for Alzheimer's disease. But dozens of programs developed in the past 20 years can improve the lives of both people living with dementia and their caregivers. Unlike support groups, these programs teach caregivers concrete skills such as how to cope with stress, make home environments safe, communicate effectively with someone who's confused, or solve problems that arise as this devastating illness progresses. (Graham, 2/27)

Also —

[The Hill: Apple Watch Ban: Here's What Happens Next](#)

An extensive legal battle is brewing after the Biden administration declined to veto an International Trade Commission (ITC) import ban on the Apple Watch. The ITC ruled in December that Apple infringed on wearable heart monitoring technology patented by California startup AliveCor. Apple currently uses an electrocardiogram sensor in question in its high-end Apple Watch models. (Evers-Hillstrom, 2/25)

[KHN: Readers And Tweeters Urgently Plea For A Proper 'Role' Call In The ER](#)

KHN gives readers a chance to comment on a recent batch of stories. (2/27)

Editorials And Opinions

[14. Viewpoints: It's Not Just The Kids Who Are Struggling; Why Are We Hesitant To Vaccinate Against Bird Flu?](#)

Editorial writers weigh in on mental health, bird flu vaccines, nonprofit hospitals and covid issues.

[Bloomberg: US Teens Feel Down, But The Adults Aren't All Right Either](#)

If no one in your circle of family and friends is mentally ill, count yourself lucky — or maybe you're just deluding yourself. In my intimate social network, I can think of at least six cases. (Niall Ferguson, 2/26)

[Bloomberg: Vaccination Skeptics Are Making The Bird Flu Epidemic Worse](#)

An especially virulent strain of bird flu has killed off more than 58 million birds in the US since January 2022. That's not the toll from disease. It's mostly the result of whole flocks of poultry slaughtered by American farmers to prevent the virus from spreading after even one infected bird is found. But those drastic measures have failed to stop the devastation. (Adam Minter, 2/26)

[Stat: Nonprofit Hospital Boards Need Better Representation](#)

More than half of U.S. hospitals are nonprofit, meaning they receive generous tax exemptions in exchange for benefiting their communities. Many aren't fulfilling that mission. (Sanjay Kishore and Suhas Gondi, 2/27)

Also —

[The Star Tribune: Needed: A COVID Backstop For Uninsured](#)

The 27.5 million Americans lacking health insurance must not be left behind as the nation moves off war footing against COVID-19 and back toward normality as the pandemic's third year ends. (2/26)

[Scientific American: The U.S. Needs A Formal Reckoning On The COVID Pandemic](#)

Three years into the COVID pandemic, more than 1.1 million people are dead, and millions more are living with long COVID. How did the nation judged most prepared for an epidemic or pandemic in 2019 suffer a death rate so much worse than peers such as Canada, Germany or Japan? (2/24)

[Stat: A Bipartisan Approach To Pandemic Security Is Within Reach](#)

Americans should be worried — and hopeful — that the Biden administration has announced it will end the Covid-19 public health emergency in May. (Beth Cameron, Gary Edson and J. Stephen Morrison, 2/27)

[CNN: Covid-19 Origins: New Assessment Only Adds To The Confusion](#)

"We want to know what led to this, so we can hopefully try and prevent something similar from happening in the future." Those words, from Dr. David Relman, an infectious disease expert and microbiologist at Stanford University, reflected the national conversation around the origins of Covid-19 in 2021. Did it come from a lab? Was it a zoonotic transfer? Something else? Surely, with time, an answer would become clear. (Paul LeBlanc, 2/27)

[Los Angeles Times: Mask Mandates And The Right Wing](#)

What is it about conservative COVID deniers and masks? For some reason, mask mandates have been the target of more overheated carping by right-wingers about anti-COVID measures than almost anything else, vaccines aside. (Michael Hiltzik, 2/24)

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