



Northern Virginia Health Policy Forum: What's Next in Healthcare: The Defining Trends to Follow

Three influential reporters who work for significant and well-known publications joined Jim Scott, President and CEO of Applied Policy, on September 19 to share their insights on what's ahead in healthcare. Each panelist is a keen and respected observer of health policy and how it is shaped in Washington as well as nationwide. Michelle Stein, Health Care Editor, Reporter, and Assistant Publisher at Inside Health Policy; Rachana Pradhan, Correspondent at KFF Health News; and Shannon Firth, Washington Correspondent at MedPage Today comprised the NVHPF panel.

With Congress back in session and election year issues coming into focus, health policy is dominating much of the conversation in Washington. At the end of August, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services – CMS – released the highly anticipated list of 10 medications that will be subject to price negotiations with the government. Now that those drugs have been selected, the focus is turning to how those negotiations will play out and what the impact will be on patients and drug development.

At the same time, in the face of a pending Government shutdown, Congress and the administration are trying to make headway addressing a host of other critical issues that impact the health of virtually every American, including issues with nursing workforce shortages, the need for hospital pricing transparency, the rise of Medicare Advantage enrollment, and maternal health.

Given the focus of the session, "What's Next in Healthcare: The Defining Trends to Follow," each participant was asked to provide input on the emerging issues that they will be following, as well as the questions that



will need to be answered before Congress, the Administration, and healthcare agencies can move forward.

Below is a summary of the key issues identified by the participants, as well as what they see as the way forward. A complete transcript is available on the [NVHPF website](#).

From Shannon Firth, Washington Correspondent at MedPage Today, on what to watch:

- **Congress is taking a critical look at drug prices**, with four different committees holding hearings on the issue, focusing primarily on the role of Pharmacy Benefit Managers (PBMs).
 - Relevant statistic from Firth: the three largest PBMs control 80% of the market, “and one of the things that Congress would like to look into is whether the consolidation of PBMs in terms of being owned or merged with health plans and pharmacies is a problem.”
- **Physicians are dissatisfied with the CMS proposed pay cut**, and there is some movement on Capitol Hill to link physician pay to inflation. Physicians themselves, given the service they provided during the pandemic, report that they feel that any pay cut would be “a slap in the face, given how hard they worked and how much they. . . put their lives on the line during the pandemic.”
- There are **efforts to expand the healthcare workforce**, notably nurses and physicians, mental health professionals and dentists. Firth will be watching a bill introduced by Senators Sanders and Marshall to “address these shortages in a comprehensive way through repayments of loans, through investing in graduate medical education (GME) spots, increasing the number of primary care GME spots and through investments in community colleges and state run programs for two-year nursing degree programs.”
 - Relevant data: a study at the University of Pennsylvania found that “nursing shortages existed prior to the pandemic” and while the pandemic was a contributing factor to the nursing crisis, it was not the root cause of the staffing problems.

- Like her colleagues, Firth will be watching **the drug price negotiations between CMS and pharmaceutical companies**. Noting pushback from the industry, she says she expects assertions that “[t]his isn't really price negotiation. It is more of price fixing price or setting.” So, in Firth's view, “we will definitely be seeing that argument in the courts along with concerns about stifling innovation.”

From Rachana Pradhan, Correspondent at KFF Health News on what she will be following:

- Pradhan sees significant interest from manufacturers of the new generation of **very effective drugs for weight loss** to obtain Medicare coverage which they cannot have due to statutory limitations.
- Given the pending election year, Pradhan will be watching how **Republicans in the House will wrap up their oversight activities of the Biden administration**, with a focus on the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) as well as the hot-button issue of drug shortages.
- As with her colleagues, Pradhan will be following the negotiation between CMS and drug manufacturers over the recently identified ten drugs. Will this ultimately bring savings to the consumer? Pradhan thinks, at this point, that “the thing that is going to provide patients more direct and probably noticeable financial relief is **the \$2,000 cap that goes into effect in 2025**”, an annual cap in out-of-pocket spending for Medicare beneficiaries under Part D implemented under another provision of the IRA.

From Michelle Stein, Health Care Editor, Reporter, and Assistant Publisher at Inside Health Policy on what she will be covering:

- For the rest of September, Stein will follow the action on the “**Lower Costs, More Transparency Act**” which includes PBM reform, hospital price transparency provisions, and funding for community health centers, as well as “a few of the others that we typically call

the health care extenders,” such as the special Diabetes Program, the National Health Service Corps, and some of the GME programs. Stein points out that these programs are set to sunset at the end of the fiscal year.

- Also related to the CMS drug negotiations, Stein is watching for potential impact of the **numerous lawsuits** which could be headed towards the Supreme Court. Another focus for Stein will be, “Are patent reforms needed in the process to prevent the reworking of drugs by the pharmaceutical companies to avoid price reforms?”
- With Open Enrollment pending for Medicare, Stein will be looking “to see what the advertising around that looks like,” given crackdowns in the past for **advertisements targeted to consumers for Medicare Advantage plans**.

With the range of issues covered, and the questions still to be answered, Michelle Stein speaking for all the reporter colleagues on the call said: “It’s going to be a very busy last few months of the year. . . at this point, mid-September could be very different from what things looks like on December 31.”

This summary was prepared by the Applied Policy® team of health policy experts.