

Ask a Patient Health News August 7 2022

Health News: August 7, 2022

- **Monkeypox** was declared a **public health emergency** in the U.S., triggering availability of financial and other assistance to states trying to contain the spread of the disease. The U.S. reports 7,102 confirmed monkeypox/orthopoxvirus cases as of August 4, 2022, which is more than double the number just two weeks ago. The global case count is 27,000. (The count was 16,000 two weeks ago). The U.S. has the highest number of cases, followed by Spain, Germany, U.K., and France.

<https://www.cdc.gov/poxvirus/monkeypox/index.html>

[U.S. Map](#) with case counts by state

[World Map](#) with case count by country

- With its pending acquisition of primary care practice company **One Medical**, retail giant **Amazon** says it plans to **reinvent the healthcare experience** and lower costs with a "human-centered and technology-powered approach." *USA Today* looks at some of the biggest pros and cons of the potential "Amazon-ification" of primary care. **Pros** include potential for reductions in cost: with over 1.6 million employees worldwide, Amazon's staff is more than twice the size of One Medical's current membership. With economies of scale, Amazon may have the power to reduce costs across the board. **Cons** include privacy concerns and "data monopoly." Do we want to allow the same company that is already privy to consumers' purchases, daily habits, and personal queries via its Alexa listening device to also access our most sensitive medical data?

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/can-amazon-and-big-tech-make-american-health-care-less-painful/ar-AA109LQ3>

- Casey Ross of STAT News uncovered startling privacy lapses and questionable business practices at **IQVIA** (formerly IMS), the **health data** powerhouse that holds health records, prescription dispensing records, and other health-related consumer information on millions of Americans. He reports that IQVIA secretly purchased detailed **financial and demographic information** on tens of millions of Americans from the credit reporting company **Experian**. This is one of many streams of data, including hospital records, that help IQVIA deliver marketing insights to **drug companies** and **device makers**. The relationship between IQVIA and Experian has some serious privacy lapses, according to internal documents.

<https://www.statnews.com/2022/07/28/top-iqvia-lawyer-declines-to-discuss-experian-relationship-but-pledges-privacy/>
(paywalled)

- In the most recent *Worst Pills* newsletter, Public Citizen's Dr. Michael Carome expresses his concerns about the reluctance by the FDA to seek input from external experts before approving new drugs. He cites a study published in *Health Affairs* that reveals that in 2010-2011, more than half of all new drugs approved by the FDA were referred to an **advisory committee** prior to approval. In stark contrast, in 2020 and 2021, the FDA referred just a small minority of the new drugs that it approved — only 8% and 6%, respectively — to an advisory committee. In some recent cases, even when the drug was submitted to a committee (such as with the controversial Alzheimer's drug Adulhelm), the voting questions posed to the committee failed to directly address whether the drug under review should be approved.

<https://www.worstpills.org/newsletters/view/1482> (paywall; abstract is available)

- In just ten years, **hospice care** has shifted from the **non-profit** to the **for-profit** sector, with more than two-thirds of hospices nationwide now managed by for-profit chains or **private equity firms**.

Kaiser Health News explains how this happened so quickly. The cost of entry into the market has been relatively low, with most care provided at home using lower-cost health workers. That allowed the entry of smaller hospices, many launched with the intent of selling within a few years. Private equity firms, backed by deep-pocketed investors, can snatch up handfuls of smaller hospices, cobble together a chain, and profit from economies of scale in administrative and supply costs, before selling to an even larger chain or another private equity firm. Many hospice veterans are worried that the original hospice vision may be

fading, as those capital investment companies' demand for return on investment and the debt load they force hospices to bear are hurting patients and their families.

<https://khn.org/news/article/hospices-private-equity-firms-end-of-life-care/>

ResearchFocus: Gout

Gout is a common, painful form of **inflammatory arthritis** that often affects the big toe joint. It is characterized by excessive amounts of **uric acid** in the blood, which can cause sudden gout flares (attacks) due to needle-like deposits of uric acid crystals in the joints, causing redness, swelling and pain. Gout affects at least 8 million American adults. Genetics likely is the cause, and overindulging in foods high in purines, such as red meat, seafood and alcohol that break down to uric acid, can cause a flare, which begins suddenly and can last for days or weeks.

<https://www.cdc.gov/arthritis/basics/gout.html>

Two **uric-acid–lowering medications** are available to treat gout: allopurinol (LOPURIN, ZYLOPRIM), which was approved in 1966, and febuxostat (ULORIC), approved in 2009 and almost 20 times more expensive than allopurinol.

Allopurinol [reviews](#)

Uloric [reviews](#)

- Public Citizen's *Worst Pills Best Pills* reports that a recent clinical trial that had hypothesized that allopurinol is inferior to febuxostat showed that **allopurinol actually did better** than **febuxostat** in controlling gout flares, including in patients with moderate chronic kidney disease. The study supports Public Citizen's Health Research Group's long-standing designation of febuxostat as a **Do Not Use** drug. The trial was funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs and initiated before the FDA warned about the risks of febuxostat and limited its use. The study was published in *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) Evidence*.

<https://www.worstpills.org/newsletters/view/1485>

- The risk of **heart attacks** and **strokes** temporarily increases in the **four months after a gout flareup**, according to research by University of Nottingham and Keele University. According to the research, gout patients who had a heart attack or stroke were twice as likely to have had a gout flare in the 60 days before the event, and one and one-half times more likely to have had a gout flare in the previous 61 to 120 days. The study was published in *JAMA*.

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/medical/gout-flareups-may-precede-heart-attack-stroke-study-says/ar-AA10er74>



Research News

- University College of London researchers, led by Joanna Moncrieff, examined the cumulative scientific evidence on the connection between **serotonin** and **depression**. They found that **trauma and stress, not chemical imbalance**, is the most likely the cause of depression. Responding to the study in *SSM-Mental Health*, Professor of psychiatry Ronald Pies and psychiatrist George Dawson stressed that most academic psychiatrists and psychopharmacologists have already known for decades that the causes of depression are "much more complicated" than just the hypothesis linking it to serotonin levels.

On the other hand, many practitioners and members of the public believe that depression is caused by a chemical imbalance or low serotonin levels. Public messaging reinforces this. For example, the Center For Medicare Services (CMS) database description of **Zoloft** says: "It works by helping to restore the balance of a certain natural substance (serotonin) in the brain." Furthermore, the public has been influenced by pharmaceutical industry advertising since the 1990s when **Prozac** (fluoxetine,

the first SRRI drug) was launched.

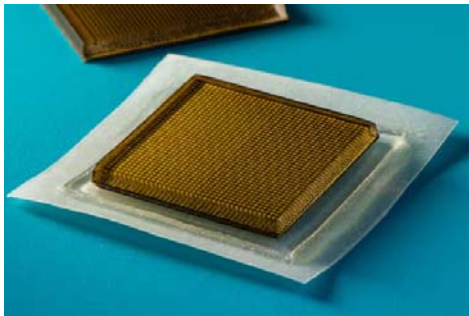
For some, the drugs have profound side effects and are difficult to discontinue. One in ten people in the U.S. take SSRI drugs for depression. The study was published in *Nature Molecular Psychiatry*.

<https://www.jpost.com/health-and-wellness/mind-and-spirit/article-713106>



- MIT engineers created a stamp-sized **ultrasound sticker** that might make the technology as wearable and accessible as buying Band-Aids at the pharmacy. Researchers applied the stickers to volunteers and showed the devices produced live, high-resolution images of **major blood vessels** and **deeper organs** such as the heart, lungs, and stomach. The stickers maintained a strong adhesion for 48 hours and captured changes in underlying organs as volunteers performed various activities, including sitting, standing, jogging, and biking. The research was published in *Science*.

<https://news.mit.edu/2022/ultrasound-stickers-0728>



Ultrasound Adhesive Sticker: Source [MIT News](#)

A short demonstration video for the technology is also included in the MIT news release.

CBD Research

- Johns Hopkins Medicine researchers analyzed the concentrations of cannabis ingredients in about 100 topical **cannabidiol (CBD)** products and found inaccuracies in the labeling of many of them. On average, the in-store products contained 21% more **CBD** than advertised and the online products contained 10% more CBD than advertised. **THC** (the ingredient in cannabis that causes a "high") was detected in 37 (35%) of the 105 products, though all were within the legal limit of 0.3%. Four (11%) of those 37 were labeled as "THC free," 14 (38%) stated they contained less than 0.3% THC and 19 (51%) did not reference THC on the label. The study was published in *JAMA Network*.

<https://www.news-medical.net/news/20220608/Study-reveals-inaccurate-label-claims-on-unregulated-CBD-products.aspx>



Sample CBD products Image Source: [CBDoilusers.com](#)

- Epidioliox is an FDA-approved prescription version of CBD that treats three rare kinds of epilepsy, but patients with common forms of epilepsy who want to try CBD don't know where to turn. Dr. Joseph Sirven, a Florida neurologist who specializes in epilepsy, said all of his patients now ask about it but he and other physicians are reluctant to advise patients on over-the-

4

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counter CBD because they don't know what's in the bottles. Kaiser Health News looks at the long history of using CBD for epilepsy and the current situation faced by patients.

<https://khn.org/news/article/epilepsy-unregulated-cbd-seizures/>



Covid-19 News and Stats

As of August 4, 2022, 50 out of 52 jurisdictions in the U.S. had high- or medium-level Community counties this week. Maine and New Hampshire are the only jurisdictions to have all counties at low Community Levels. Currently, most of the country is reporting moderate to high SARS-CoV-2 levels in wastewater. About half of sites reporting wastewater data are currently seeing some of the highest levels for those sites since December 1, 2021.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/covidview/index.html>

Globally, the World Health Organization reports that the number of weekly cases decreased by 9% during the week of 25 to 31 July 2022 as compared to the previous week, with over 6.5 million new cases reported. Omicron variant of concern (VOC) and its descendant lineages, account for 99% of sequences reported globally in the past 30 days. No new subvariants or variants have been reported.

<https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/weekly-epidemiological-update-on-covid-19---3-august-2022>

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