Study: Coupons driving up the cost of health care

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – The proliferation of brand name drug "co-pay coupon" promotions lure insured consumers from generics to more expensive brands and will increase health care costs by $253 million in Nevada over the next decade, a new national study says.

The use of these promotions by state and local government workers alone will cost Nevada taxpayers an extra $31 million over ten years, the study says.

The practice of offering the co-pay coupons will mean increased costs for employers, unions and state employee plans, according to new research from Visante and released by the Pharmaceutical Care Management Association (PCMA). The association represents the nation's pharmacy benefit managers who work for the health care plans operated by governments, unions and private employers.

"Brand co-pay coupons lure patients from generics to expensive brands and stick employers, unions, and government employee health programs with the extra costs," said PCMA President and CEO Mark Merritt. "In Nevada, taxpayers will pay an extra $31 million just to cover the use of brand co-pay coupons by government workers in state and municipal employee health programs."

The report says the co-pay promotions are aimed only at those who already have prescription drug coverage. The coupons are banned in both the Medicare and Medicaid programs, but are allowed in the commercial market except in Massachusetts because of its comprehensive health care law.

Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) Vice President Karl Uhlendorf issued a statement in response to the study: “For years, America’s biopharmaceutical research companies have helped patients suffering from disease access programs that can help them get the medicines they need. Co-pay assistance programs are an example of this kind of help.

“Coupons and vouchers provide an important benefit to patients by defraying the cost of out-of-pocket payments, breaking down barriers to access and encouraging better medication adherence,” he said.

PhRMA represents the country’s leading pharmaceutical research and biotechnology companies. PhRMA members invested an estimated $49.4 billion in 2010 in discovering and developing new medicines. Industry-wide research and investment reached a record $67.4 billion in 2010.

In a telephone interview, Merritt said the purpose of the study is to educate consumers about the true costs of the promotions to themselves and their health care plans, many of which are paid in part by taxpayers.

“I think the first step is education to show payers, whether they be taxpayers or businesses or unions, how much money is being wasted by these co-pay coupons,” he said. “And I think that people have not realized that by getting people to switch from generics to brands, and from less expensive brands to more expensive brands, it costs billions of dollars a year and hundreds of millions to each state around the country.”

Merritt said the practice is increasing because their brand drugs are coming off patent, opening them up to competition from generic drugs.

The coupons may be seen as a value by consumers, but the co-pay does not reflect the real cost of the brand drug, he said.

“Health insurance, two-thirds of it is paid by the companies,

by the unions, in the case of public workers, by the taxpayers; and so people need to understand there is a cost to this," Merritt said. "And I think most people don't know that. They see the coupon and they think, 'hey great, I'm saving money and no one gets hurt.' But the reality is ultimately this will lead to higher premiums for consumers."

Opinion: Time to rectify imbalance of wealth, political power

By Robert Reich

The biggest question in America these days is how to revive the economy.

The biggest question among activists now occupying Wall Street and dozens of American cities is how to strike back against the nation's almost unprecedented concentration of income, wealth and political power in the top 1 percent.

The two questions are related. With so much income and wealth concentrated at the top, the vast middle class no longer has the purchasing power to buy what the economy is capable of producing. (People could pretend otherwise as long as they could treat their homes as ATMs, but the borrowing ended when the housing bubble burst in 2008.)

The result is prolonged stagnation and high unemployment as far as the eye can see. The Labor Department recently reported 80,000 new jobs in October. But more than 100,000 are needed just to keep up with the growth of the nation's working-age

population. And the wages of most people with jobs continue to drop.

Until we reverse the trend toward inequality, the economy can't be revived.

Yet the biggest question in our nation's capital right now has nothing to do with any of this. It's whether Congress' supercommittee – six Democrats and six Republicans charged with coming up with at least $1.2 trillion in budget savings – will reach agreement in time for the Congressional Budget Office to score its proposal, which then must be approved by Congress before Dec. 23 to avoid an automatic $1.2 trillion in budget savings requiring major across-the-board cuts starting in 2013.

Robert Reich, former U.S. Secretary of Labor, is professor of public policy at UC Berkeley and the author of "Aftershock: The Next Economy and America's Future."

Read the whole story

More people expected to travel during Thanksgiving holiday

AAA forecasts 42.5 million Americans will travel 50 miles or more from home during the Thanksgiving holiday weekend (Nov. 23-27), a 4 percent increase from the 40.9 million people who traveled last year.

"This is the first significant increase in any holiday travel this year," Bill Sutherland, vice president of AAA Travel

Services, said in a press release. “Memorial Day travel was statistically flat, while Independence Day and Labor Day travel experienced decreases of 2.5 percent and 2.4 percent, respectively.”



Expect the roads to full with Thanksgiving travelers. Photo/LTN file

With volumes still below historical averages, pent-up demand will be a contributing factor in increased holiday travel, despite current economic conditions.

Approximately 38.2 million people (90 percent of holiday travelers) plan to take to the nation’s roadways this Thanksgiving holiday weekend, a 4 percent increase compared to Thanksgiving 2010 when auto travelers totaled 36.8 million. Automobile travel remains the preferred choice of transportation for holiday travelers as it is often more affordable, convenient and flexible. The current national average price for regular unleaded gasoline is approximately $3.39 per gallon, about 50 cents more than one year ago. However, the national average price is about 60 cents less than this year’s peak price of $3.98 on May 5.

Almost 3.4 million leisure travelers (8 percent of holiday travelers) will fly during the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, a 1.8 percent increase from 2010. Fuel costs, combined with

steady air travel demand and capacity cuts have resulted in rising airfares over the past year. According to AAA's Leisure Travel Index, Thanksgiving airfares are expected to be 20 percent higher than last year, with an average lowest roundtrip rate of $212 for the top 40 U.S. air routes. The combination of higher fares and lower availability of seats is expected to limit air travel growth this holiday to less than half of total traveler growth.

Other modes of travel (bus, trains, watercraft, multi-modal travel) will make up the remaining two percent of the total person-trips, with just over 900,000 people expected to travel by these modes, 14.7 percent higher than in 2010.

Hotel rates for AAA Three Diamond or mid-range lodgings are expected to increase 6 percent from one year ago with travelers spending an average of $145 per night compared to $136 last year. Travelers planning to stay at AAA Two Diamond hotels can expect to pay 7 percent more at an average cost of $103 per night. Weekend daily car rental rates will average $37, an 11 percent decrease from one year ago.

According to a survey of traveler intentions, the average distance traveled by Americans during the Thanksgiving holiday is expected to be 706 miles, which is a decline of 13.5 percent from last year when travelers planned to log an average of 816 miles. Median spending is expected to be $554, which is a 12 percent increase from $495 last year. However, Thanksgiving holiday travel is typically less expensive than other travel holidays because of the emphasis on the Thanksgiving meal and gathering of friends and family. Fuel and transportation costs combine to consume the largest share of holiday spending (33 percent), followed by shopping (18 percent) and food and beverages (18 percent. Other expenditures include accommodations (16 percent), entertainment and recreation (12 percent), and other costs (3 percent).

Choral extravaganza at MontBleu

The 17th annual MontBleu Holiday Extravaganza is Dec. 14 and Dec. 15, starting at 7pm each night.

Students in grades 3-12 in the various Lake Tahoe Unified School District choirs are the stars of the show.

Tickets are $10 for adults and $5 for seniors/students. Tickets are available at the door.

Thankfulness – the No. 1 ingredient in a feast for 300

By Kathryn Reed

Vegetables keep being washed. Knives don't seem to stop. Bread comes and goes from the oven. Cranberries whir in the food processor.

It's Sunday afternoon and the kitchen at Grace Hall in South Lake Tahoe is a bevy of activity in preparation for tonight's annual community Thanksgiving dinner. With 275 people served last year, it's anticipated 325 could come through the doors today from 4-5:30pm.



William Wagener adds veggies to what will become turkey stock. Photos/Kathryn Reed

While cooking for so many is serious business, everyone in the kitchen is having fun. Laughter fills the air along with aromas from the stove. Some of the crew are regulars on Mondays to help with the weekly Bread & Broth dinners – people like John Mauriello and William Wagener. Others help on special occasions – like Billy Marchetti, Ellen Nadreau and Mark Nadreau.

Diane Weidinger is the maestro in the kitchen, while her right-hand woman is Kathi Olsen.

Everyone on Nov. 20 expresses gratitude for being able to give back – a thankfulness to be part of something special and meaningful.

A woman stops by asking if she can volunteer. Because she has her serve safe certification she's given an apron and put on orange detail. She's in tears when she arrives and tears when she leaves.

"You guys help me way more than I helped you. You made may day," Jennifer says. Out of work, she's been at Bread & Broth the previous two Mondays for the free hot meal.

When it comes to the food for tonight, Weidinger said, “Thanksgiving is always about tradition.”

Turkey, stuffing, yams, pumpkin pie – are just some of the items on the menu.

Tips are given – like put some lemon juice or white wine on the mushrooms to keep them fresh. Some volunteers are professionals in the restaurant business, while others just like to be in the kitchen working. The regulars say they are always learning something. At times they are the ones creating the menu Monday nights.

It was the stuffing and fresh cranberries that were being assembled yesterday.

Onions, carrots, celery – all chopped in order to be sautéed. Loaves and loaves of bread cut into (large, by some standards) bite-size pieces for stuffing.

Oranges were zested for the cranberry relish.

The cranberry concoction is one of the first dishes Marchetti learned to cook in culinary school in 1977.

Cranberry Orange Relish

4 C fresh cranberries, rinsed

¾ C sugar

1 whole orange

½ tsp fresh grated ginger

Blanch cranberries for five minutes, chill.

Peel the orange. Reserve the sections, remove the thick white pith and reserve the zest.

Combine the cranberries, sugar, orange zest and ginger. Pulse

in a food processor until chunky. Chill and serve.

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Bread & Broth’s 23rd annual Thanksgiving feast is today from 4-5:30pm for anyone. St. Theresa Church is located at 1041 Lyons Ave. in South Lake Tahoe.

While Bread & Broth has an arsenal of about 100 volunteers and does not need to expand right now, what it does need is people or businesses to participate in the Adopt A Day program. This is where for $250 a Monday night meal (other than Thanksgiving) is supplied to about 100 people, with four people from the business helping in the kitchen. For more information, contact Connie Blue at midwest2tahoe@yahoo.com or (530) 544.4945.

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Care packages for troops beings put together

Care packages will be assembled Dec. 3 at the American Legion Post 795 in South Lake Tahoe.

Everyone is invited to help pack up the packages for the troops.

Patty Smith, mother of Sgt. Timothy Smith who died in Iraq in 2008, is spearheading the drive.

Drop off boxes located at: Grocery Outlet, Moose Lodge 961

Eloise, Cancer League Candy Store at 2358 Highway 50 (next to Grocery Outlet), and Carson Valley Medical Center 1107 Highway 395 in Gardnerville.

Checks may be made out to the American Legion Post 795 Care Packages for Troops. Mail them to Patty Smith, P.O. Box 13958, South Lake Tahoe, CA 96151.

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3 fire captains in South Tahoe to be promoted

Three captains in the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department are being promoted to shift commander, a new position since the rank of battalion chief was done away with (and those three positions eliminated) when the City Council approved the 2011-12 budget.



Jim Drennan, Rob Hembree and Dan Sullivan will be officially promoted Nov. 21 at 2:30pm at the city offices at Lake Tahoe Airport.

They report directly to the fire chief, a position being filled this fiscal year by Police Chief Brian Uhler.

This link provides a job description of what is expected of the men and their salary range. This reflects a boost in pay of 10 percent from what they were making as captains.

Drennan has been with South Tahoe since December 2002, having started as a reserve two years before that. He has lived in

the area since 1989. Drennan is also an instructor at the Lake Tahoe Community College Fire Academy.

Hembree also started his fire career as a reserve before joining the department full time in 2002. He moved to South Tahoe in 1995.

Sullivan is a South Tahoe High grad and one of the original EMS coordinators. He has been with the department since 1999, serving as a reserve three years prior to that.

A position still to be dealt within the department is that of fire marshal. Ray Zachau, as battalion chief, was also fire marshal. And he still is. Even though his job was eliminated last month, city officials have not determined when his last day is. They city also has not posted the job of fire marshal.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



• The 2011 American Century Championship golf tournament will be rebroadcast on the Golf Channel Nov. 25-27 at 4:30pm and Dec. 22-24 at 5pm.

• Squaw Valley Ski Holdings LLC is pledging $25,000 to the Community House, a new community center and a service delivery program spearheaded by the Tahoe Truckee Community Foundation.

• The USGA announced Martis Camp Club in Truckee will host the Junior Amateur in July 2013. The U.S. Junior Amateur is essentially the national championship for players under age

18.

• Caltrans has released its roadwork schedule for this week in the Sierra and El Dorado-Tahoe.

• UrbanSitter.com is going to spread to the greater Lake Tahoe area in January. Parents and potential sitters may sign up now to create profiles.

S. Shore festival is more than extravagantly decorated trees

Barton Foundation's third annual Festival of Trees and Lights (Dec. 2-4) will bring in the holiday season with trees and lights, all while benefiting the community by raising funds for the Barton Community Clinic.

More than 2,800 attended the 2010 event at MontBleu in Stateline.

This year's event includes designer trees and decorations, family night, teddy bear breakfast, teddy bear hospital, Barton's annual gala, Mrs. Claus' Gift Shop and the Polar Express.



The Festival of Trees and Lights is Dec. 2-4 at MontBleu. Photo/LTN file

With more than 2,500 lights, the themed trees include gift packages ranging from exotic trips to exquisite items that will be voted on throughout the event and auctioned off at the gala. At the gala, doctors Paul Rork, Greg Bergner, and Brooks Martin will be honored with the Spirit of Philanthropy Award.

Here is a rundown of the ticketed events:

* Teddy Bear Hospital provides an interactive way for kids to learn about their health and hospitals in a fun, safe, “no poke” environment from real doctors, nurses and caregivers. Every child 12 and under attending the festival during the public viewing and Family Night will receive a free teddy bear.

* Family Night, Dec. 2 from 5-9pm, offers a time for families to experience the festival together. The $25 (up to 6 people) admission fee includes a Santa photo, holiday-inspired crafts and face painting. *Lake Tahoe News* is giving away tickets to this event.

* Teddy Bear Breakfast, Dec. 3 at 8:30am, bring your child’s favorite doll or stuffed animal to be adorned with holiday flair while you enjoy a kid-friendly buffet. They can enjoy a puppet show, costumed characters will roam the room and, of course, Santa will be there to hear your child’s wishes and create that keepsake holiday photo. Adults $20; Children (8 and under) $15.

* The Gala, Dec. 3 at 5:30pm, is the Barton Foundation’s largest annual fundraiser. The black-tie optional event

features a live auction, expanded silent auction, live entertainment and the winning cocktail from our Signature Cocktail Contest. This event is sold out.

* Polar Express, Dec. 5 at 4 and 6pm. Dress up in your best pajamas and grab a seat on one of the "trains." Have your ticket punched by our conductors, sing carols as you make your way to the Red Hut for a cup of hot chocolate. From there the "trains" continue on to the MontBleu for refreshments, the reading of the "Polar Express", and the songs of the Belles of Christmas choir. Space is limited to 300 people per departure. Tickets are $15 per person.

Proceeds from the Festival of Trees and Lights will benefit the expansion and renovation of the Barton Community Clinic to meet the needs of more the 1,600 uninsured and underinsured of patients each month. Last year, the foundation raised nearly $45,000 for the Community Health Endowment which – created to ensure the future health of the Tahoe region. The clinic is expected to break ground in 2012.

To purchase tickets or for more information, go online or call (530) 543.5614.

TRPA sets holiday hours

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency will be closed Nov. 25-27 as well as Dec. 23-Jan. 2.

The front counter will reopen Jan. 3. It will be closed every Tuesday because of budget constraints.

For additional information, call Kristi Boosman at (775) 589.5230 or send an email to kboosman@trpa.org.