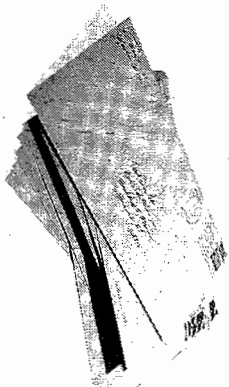


HEALTH

WALL STREET JOURNAL
11/12/2004

Health Mailbox

Columnist Tara Parker-Pope
answers readers' questions



Q: I have been exploring getting a health savings account in New York, but have been told that this isn't possible yet due to state regulations. Is this true? —M.Y., New York

A: Six firms have been approved in New York to offer high-deductible health plans coupled with health savings accounts, according to a spokesman for the New York State Insurance Department. The firms are PerfectHealth Insurance Co., Aetna Life Insurance, Mutual of Omaha, Excellus Health Plan, Empire Healthchoice Assurance and CDPHP Universal Benefits Corp. Despite the approvals, some firms may not be offering the plans to a certain part of the state, which may explain why you've been told the plans aren't yet available to you. But one company, PerfectHealth, has been offering the plans on a statewide basis and training brokers for nearly a year. For more information, go to www.perfectly.com. HSAs work like retirement accounts, allowing you to accumulate tax-free savings and even to lower your tax rate, depending on your income. To learn more about HSAs, go to the Web site www.hsafinder.com, which offers a useful primer on health savings accounts as well as a calculator for a list of providers, to find out if the plans make sense for your personal situation and other information.

Q: I have rosacea on my face, which at times causes pustules. I have tried numerous things, but none seem to help. Is there an over-the-counter medication that will help? —G.M.

A: Over-the-counter medications don't work very well to treat rosacea, a surprisingly common but little-understood problem that can cause redness and flushing on the face. (Former President Bill Clinton suffers from the condition.) Sometimes rosacea is mistaken for acne, because it can cause unsightly bumps or pustules on the face. Over-the-counter acne treatments like benzoyl peroxide may help, but because they dry the skin, they can also make the condition worse, says Richard Odom, former chairman of dermatology at University of California-San Francisco and now a private-practice dermatologist in the area. The main concern is that rosacea is a chronic condition. You get better results if you start treating it early. The time you spend looking for an over-the-counter remedy would be better spent consulting with a dermatologist, who can advise you about over-the-counter and prescription topical treatments. Antibiotics, prescription acne drugs, certain types of laser treatments, acid peels or anti-inflammatory drugs might also be prescribed. The National Rosacea Society Web site at www.rosacea.org is a good resource for more information. The site also in-

cludes a patient checklist to help you determine what food or other environmental sources might be exacerbating the condition. The Web site of the American Academy of Dermatology, www.skincarephysicians.com, also provides a link to learn more about rosacea and other skin conditions. A dermatologist can also give you advice about green-tinted makeup, available over-the-counter, that can be used to conceal the redness of rosacea.

Q: Is it true that flu vaccines were previously being made in the U.S. but because of a frivolous lawsuit the products were moved to the U.K. where similar suits wouldn't be possible? —D.D., Raleigh, N.C.

A: Lawsuits and liability aren't the reason we have a shortage of flu vaccine. According to research by the Association of Trial Lawyers of America, out of hundreds of millions of doses of flu vaccine dispensed since 1980, there have been just seven lawsuits reported in state and federal appellate courts involving the standard flu vaccine. In five of those cases, the vaccine firm prevailed; the results of the other two are unknown.

The real issue is that all vaccines, including flu vaccine, are extraordinarily difficult to make. Makers of vaccines face stringent regulatory standards. While manufacturing problems at a British plant stymied the supply of flu vaccine expected this year from shot-maker Chiron, other companies have faced similar manufacturing, compliance and contamination problems in previous years, causing delays and shortages of both flu and other vaccines.

For a drug company, the economics of making flu vaccine are particularly tough because the flu virus changes each year, so they can't reuse any vaccine that is left over. As a result, drug makers have to guess how much vaccine the public will demand. And U.S. consumers are fickle. This year consumers are clamoring for the vaccine because there's a shortage. In previous years, manufacturers had to throw away millions of doses because too few people wanted a flu shot. Wyeth got out of the business of making flu vaccine a few years ago after it had to throw away several million doses.

So what's the solution? The health-care community wants the government to promise vaccine makers that it will pay for any unused vaccine. If drug makers know they won't lose money on the venture, more companies are likely to get into the business. If more companies are making flu shots, the manufacturing woes of one firm in a given year won't have as much of an impact on the overall supply of vaccine.

E-mail questions to Tara Parker-Pope at healthjournal@wsj.com.

Strep Throat

Two Efforts Look at Link
Between Bacterial Infection
And Disorder in Children

By HEATHER WON TESORIERO

Two new studies are examining a potential link between the bacteria that cause strep throat and the onset of obsessive-compulsive disorder in some children.

The studies are the latest in a series to try to better understand a condition called PANDAS, which stands for pediatric autoimmune neuropsychiatric disorders associated with streptococcal infection. Children with PANDAS develop obsessive-compulsive disorder, often accompanied with tics or Tourette's Syndrome, after strep throat, the common childhood ailment brought on by group A beta-hemolytic streptococcus.

Researchers believe that PANDAS is one of several conditions resulting from antibodies attacking the basal ganglia, a set of structures at the base of the brain that help control and coordinate movements. When strep goes undetected or untreated, in some cases the body can build up antibodies to strep that also mistakenly attack the brain, according to the theory.

Obsessive-compulsive behaviors in PANDAS patients relapse and remit, flaring up when a child has repeated bouts with strep. In many cases, less pronounced OCD symptoms persist even when the child doesn't have a strep infection. One six-month study currently being conducted at the National Institute of Mental Health is examining the prophylactic use of penicillin to prevent recurrence of OCD symptoms in children. A second, year-long NIMH study is comparing the OCD traits in PANDAS and non-PANDAS cases. Both studies have begun but are also enrolling new patients.

The PANDAS link was discovered in 1998 by Susan Swedo, a senior investigator in the intramural research program at the NIMH. Dr. Swedo and Judith Rapoport, another senior investigator, drew upon research showing that children with multiple motor tics experienced obsessive-compulsive traits, such as repetitive behaviors and counting.

Dr. Swedo was looking for a medical model for OCD, and made the connection that some kids experienced pronounced OCD symptoms when they had strep throat. Epidemiological data suggest that approximately 1% to 1.5% of children suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder; of these, one in 10 meet the full criteria for PANDAS, or about one in 1,000 of all children. PANDAS isn't known to affect adults, 98% of whom have developed strep antibodies.

Researchers have found that children with PANDAS have abnormally high levels of strep antibodies. They also believe that kids with a family history of OCD may be more susceptible to PANDAS.

One of the key symptoms of PANDAS is an "explosive onset" of obsessive-compulsive behaviors. Some classic traits are disturbing, intrusive thoughts, abnormally frequent urination, and inappropri-

Bottled Water Isn't Always Pure

Dr. MARTIN CHASE

likes to ask his members of his lab to

'Kids will have a lot of
unusual fears that

www.thelab.com