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March/April 1998

The Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard Health News Index is designed to help the news media and people in the health field gain a better understanding of which health stories in the news Americans are following and what they understand about those health issues. Every two months, Kaiser/Harvard issues a new index report. This eleventh report is based on a survey of 1,201 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between March 1 and April 6, 1998. For comparison purposes, respondents were also asked about other leading issues in the news during the same period.

HEALTH NEWS STORIES FOLLOWED BY THE PUBLIC

A large majority (87%) of Americans said they followed the shooting attack on an Arkansas school by two boys very or fairly closely. Seven in ten (71%) reported following the dismissal of Paula Jones' sexual misconduct suit against President Clinton. The debate over how to reform the Social Security system was followed by about half (52%) of Americans.

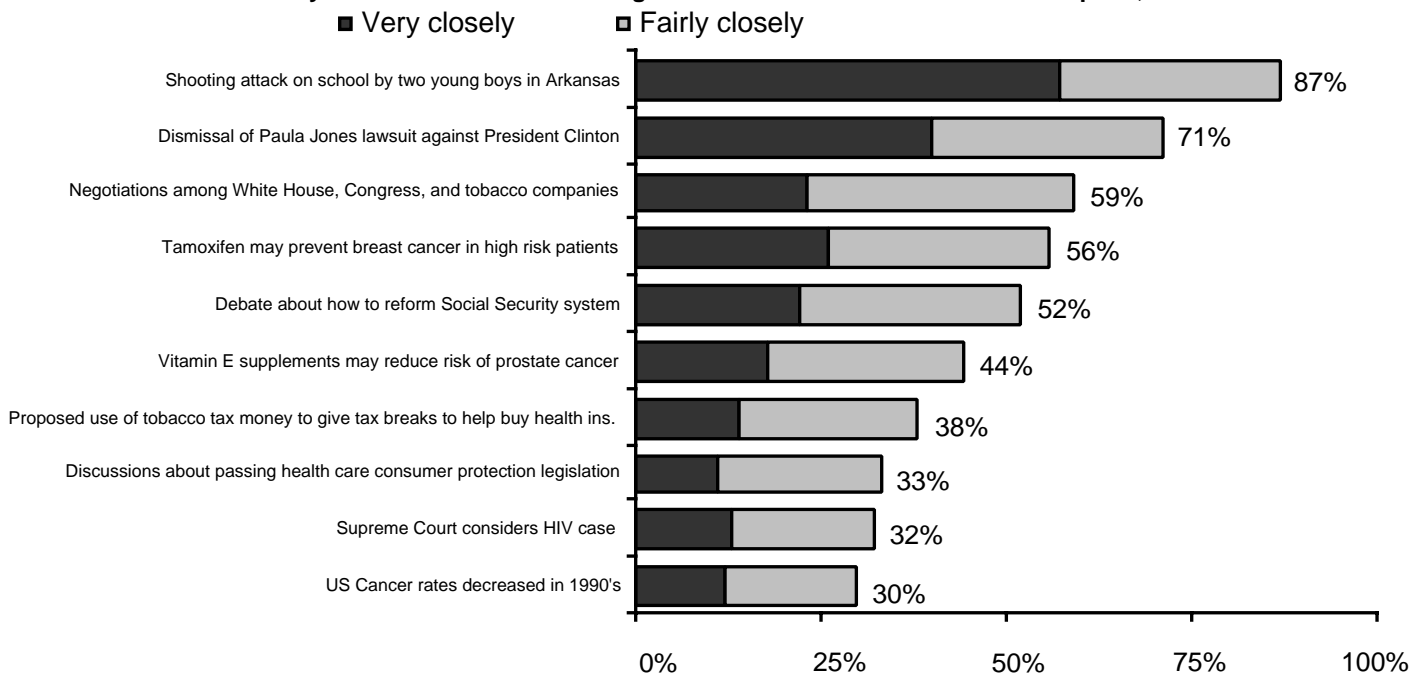
By comparison, the most closely followed health-related story was the negotiations over a tobacco "deal" among the White House, Congress, and tobacco companies, which was followed very or fairly closely by three in five (59%) of those surveyed. Stories about the proposal in Congress to use tobacco tax money to help uninsured workers and small businesses buy health insurance via tax breaks was followed by 38% of Americans.

Several cancer stories appeared during March and early April. The cancer story followed most closely (56%) involved the new drug tamoxifen, which may prevent breast cancer in woman at high risk. Another cancer related story--that vitamin E supplements may reduce men's risk of prostate cancer--was followed closely by 44% of Americans. Only 30% followed the news about declining US cancer rates.

Discussions in Washington, DC about passing health care consumer protection measures were followed by 33% of the public, up from 23% in November 1997. Similarly, 32% followed closely the Supreme Court case of an HIV-positive woman who sued her dentist for refusing to treat her.

THE KAISER/HARVARD HEALTH NEWS INDEX

How closely Americans followed leading stories in the news from March 1 to April 6, 1998



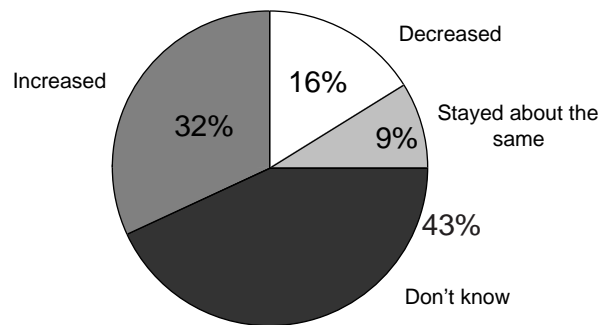
Vol. 3, No. 2

A Product of the Kaiser/Harvard Program on the Public and Health Policy

WHAT THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS ABOUT HEALTH STORIES IN THE NEWS

In the early 1990's, did the number of new cancer cases in the US increase, decrease, or stay the same?

Cancer: There were stories in the news about a new study of cancer rates by the American Cancer Society and the Centers for Disease Control which reported that the number of new cancer cases declined in the early 1990s. Sixteen percent of those surveyed knew that cancer rates had declined. One in three (32%) incorrectly thought cancer rates had increased, while almost one in ten (9%) mistakenly said they had stayed about the same. Two in five (43%) said they didn't know.

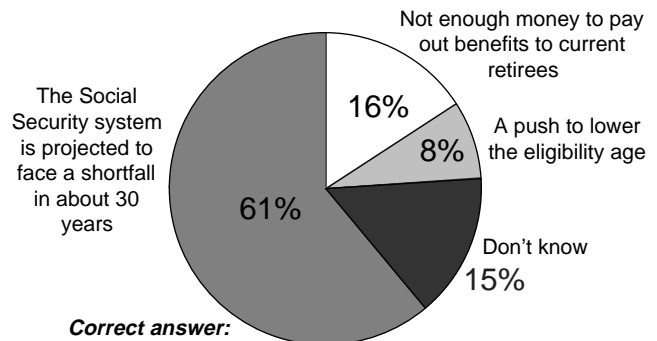


Correct answer:

Decreased

Social Security: March news reports featured a town hall meeting organized by President Clinton to promote a national dialogue on Social Security. About three in five (61%) Americans knew that the main reason for the debate over Social Security was because it is projected to face a shortfall in about 30 years. Sixteen percent mistakenly thought there was not enough money in the system to pay current retirees, 8% thought there was a push to lower the eligibility age, and 15% said they didn't know.

What is the main reason for discussions about changing the Social Security system?

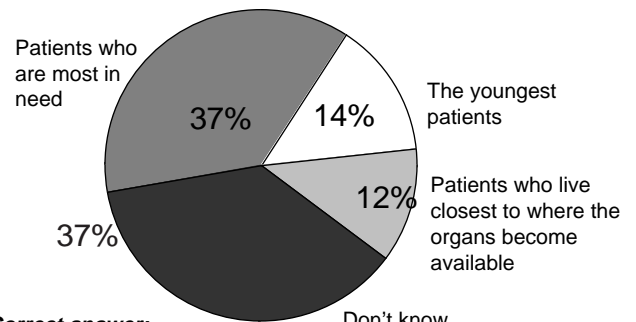


Correct answer:

The Social Security system is projected to face a shortfall in about 30 years.

Organ Donations: The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recommended in March that patients with the most dire need, regardless of where they live, should be the first to receive organ donations. Approximately two in five (37%) Americans knew that this was the new policy recommended by HHS. The same proportion (37%) said they didn't know what HHS had recommended. The rest incorrectly said that HHS had advised that organ donations go to patients who were geographically closest to the donor (12%) or that the youngest patients should have first priority (14%).

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, who should receive priority for organ donations?



Correct answer:

Patients who are most in need

The Kaiser/Harvard Health News Index is based on a national random sample survey of 1,201 Americans conducted April 17-27, 1998, to measure Americans' interest in and knowledge of health stories covered in the news media during the previous month. The survey was designed and analyzed jointly by the staff of the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University in consultation with the Pew Center for The People and The Press. The survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates. The margin of error is $\pm 3\%$. For additional copies of this report, please call (800) 656-4533.