

The Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard Health News Index is designed to help the news media and people in the health care field gain a better understanding of which health stories in the news Americans are following and what they understand about the health issues covered in the news. Every two months, Kaiser/Harvard issues a new index report. This seventh report is based on a survey of 1,000 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between July 1 and 31, 1997. 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

The health-related story followed most closely by Americans during July was the decision by R.J. Reynolds not to use the "Joe Camel" character in its advertising anymore. This story was followed very or fairly closely by 61% of Americans. Nearly as many said they followed the changes to the television program ratings system announced in July (59%)

and the exploration of Mars by the Pathfinder spacecraft (58%).

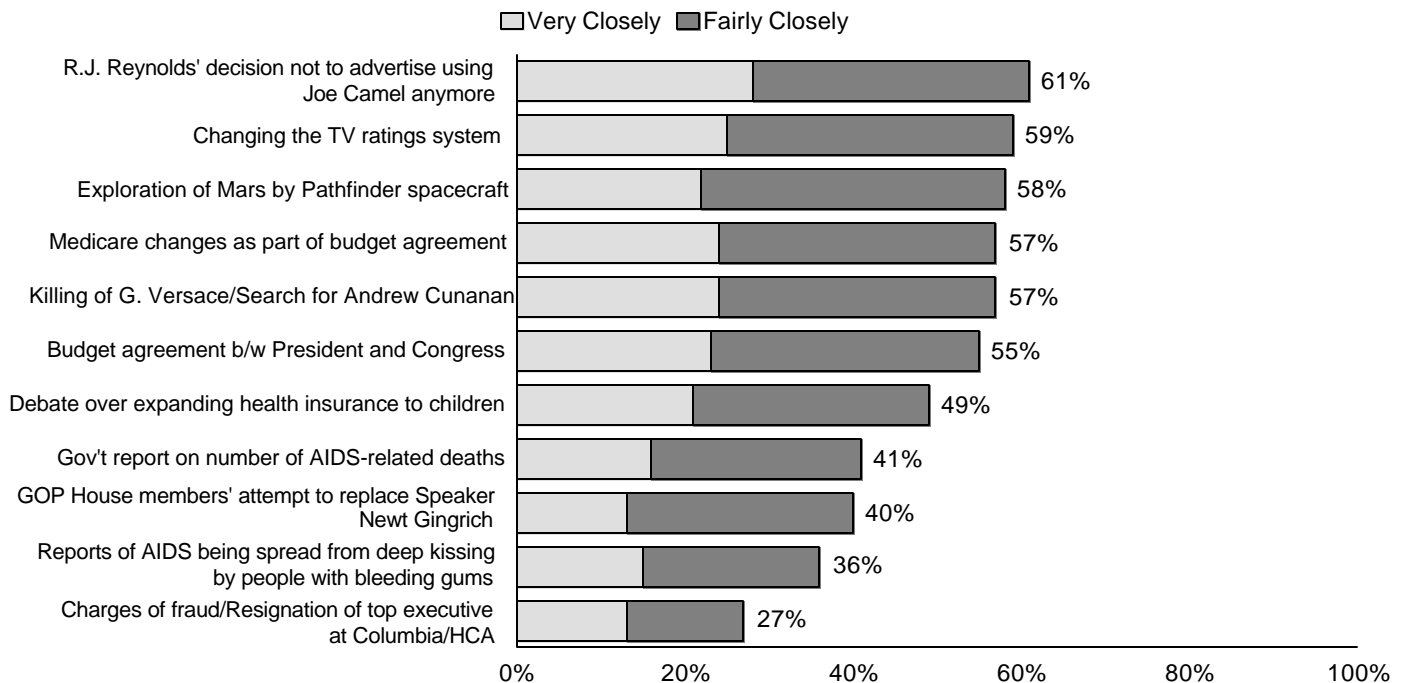
More than half (55%) of the public followed the budget agreement that was reached by the President and Congress in July very or fairly closely. Almost three in five (57%) said they followed the changes in the Medicare program that were part of the budget negotiations. Another health provision of the budget negotiations, the expansion of health insurance to uninsured children, was followed by just less than half (49%) of Americans.

A government report on the decline in the number of AIDS-related deaths was followed by two in five (41%) Americans in July. About a third (36%) reported following another AIDS-related story--the reports that HIV was spread from a man's mouth to a woman through their bleeding gums.

Stories describing the charges of fraud and the resignation of a top executive at Columbia/HCA, a for-profit hospital chain, was followed very or fairly closely by about one-quarter (27%) of the public.

THE KAISER/HARVARD HEALTH NEWS INDEX

How closely Americans followed leading stories in the news from July 1 to 31, 1997



WHAT THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS ABOUT HEALTH STORIES IN THE NEWS

The Budget Agreement: Although a majority of those surveyed said they followed the budget agreement (55%) and the negotiations over Medicare (57%), public knowledge about the specifics of the changes to Medicare was uneven. About half incorrectly thought that raising the Medicare eligibility age (48%) and imposing higher Medicare premiums on upper-income seniors (51%) were part of the final Medicare provisions. Less than half knew that the final agreement gave seniors wider choice of health care plans under Medicare (39%) and cut payments to doctors, hospitals, and HMOs (43%).

A slight majority (52%) correctly said that the budget agreement and the changes to Medicare would keep the program from going bankrupt for another ten years.

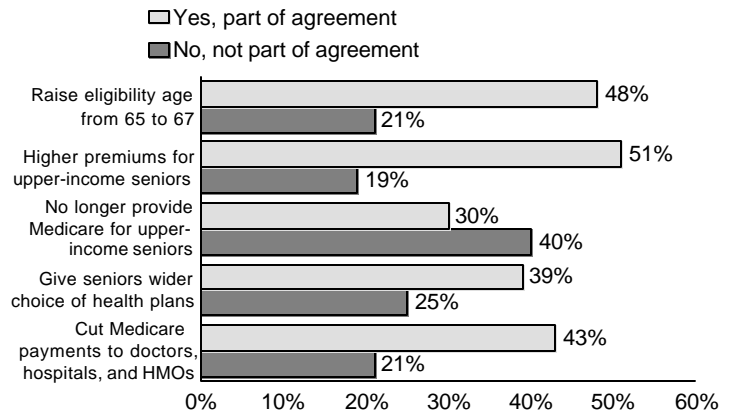
Just less than half (44%) of all Americans knew that the budget deal would expand health insurance to children.

AIDS/HIV: Last month the government issued a report on the number of AIDS-related deaths in the United States. Only one-fourth (27%) knew that the number of AIDS-related deaths had decreased in recent years.

Reports of the transmission of HIV from a man's mouth to a woman through deep kissing were followed very or fairly closely by 36% of Americans. More than half (51%) knew that scientists and public health officials think the virus was transmitted through blood from bleeding gums. Only 13% incorrectly thought that the transmission had occurred through saliva.

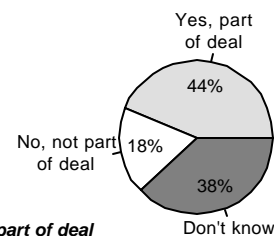
Columbia/HCA: In July, the government announced that it was investigating Columbia/HCA, a for-profit hospital chain, for cheating the Medicare program. Nearly half (46%) of Americans knew that fraud was what the government was investigating Columbia/HCA for. Seven percent thought Columbia/HCA was being investigated for not paying taxes, 5% thought the company had been withholding dividends from stockholders, and 42% said they didn't know why it was being investigated.

Which of the following were part of the new budget agreement?



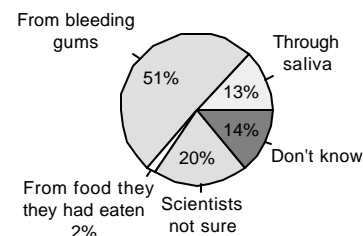
Correct answers: Give seniors wider choice of health plans
Cut Medicare payments to doctors, hospitals, and HMOs

Was expansion of health insurance to uninsured children part of the budget deal?



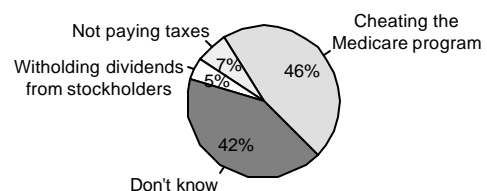
Correct answer: Yes, part of deal

How do scientists think HIV was transmitted from a man's mouth to a woman while kissing?



Correct answer: From bleeding gums

Why is the government investigating Columbia/HCA?



Correct answer: Cheating the Medicare program

The Kaiser/Harvard Health News Index is based on a national random sample survey of 1,000 Americans conducted August 7-10, 1997, to measure Americans' interest in and knowledge of health stories covered by 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.