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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 thirteenth report is based on a survey of 1,200 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between July 5 and July 31, 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

The health news stories followed most closely by Americans in July were the announcement by the Clinton administration of a new television ad campaign aimed at reducing teenage drug use and President Clinton's forums on the future of Social Security (both were followed very or fairly closely by 58% of the American people). By comparison, 81% closely followed the shooting at the Capitol building in Washington, DC, in which two police officers

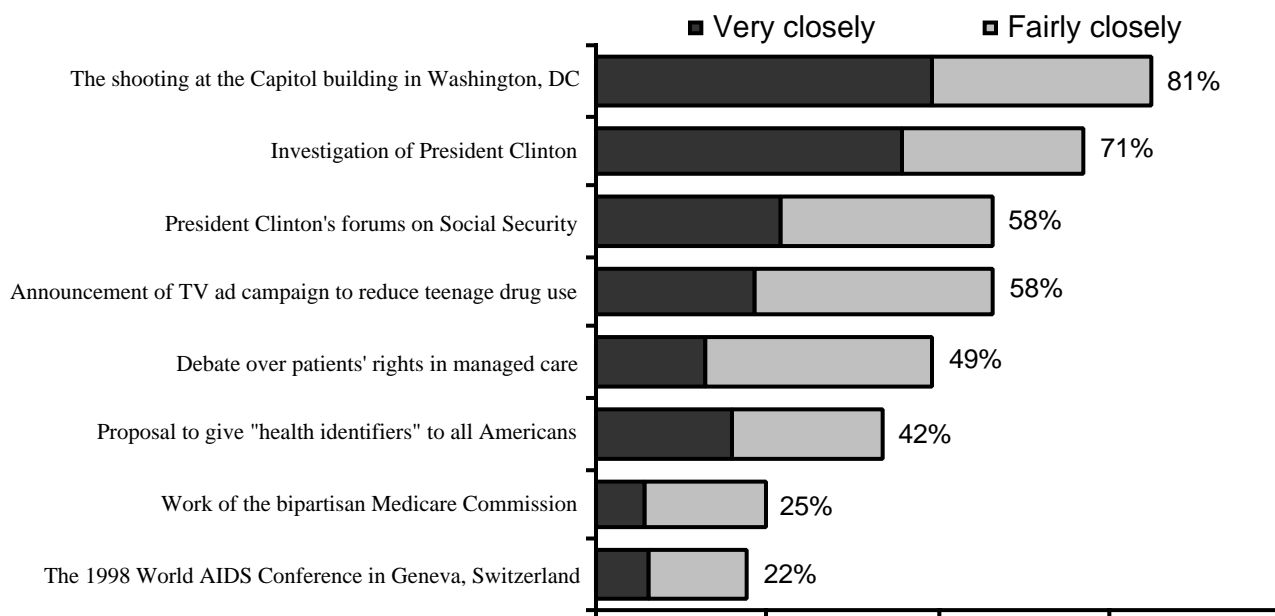
were killed and 71% news stories about the ongoing investigation of President Clinton.

About half (49%) of those surveyed said they followed stories on the debate about patients' rights. Stories about the Clinton administration proposal to give medical identification numbers or "health identifiers" to all Americans were followed very or fairly closely by less than half (42%) of Americans. One in four reported following closely the work of the national bipartisan Medicare Commission.

Fewer than one in four (22%) Americans closely followed news coverage of the World AIDS Conference in Geneva, Switzerland. When asked specifically about news topics from the Conference, 64% said they heard or saw reports from the Conference that AIDS is spreading rapidly in developing countries. Two in five Americans heard that the new AIDS treatments are not as effective as originally hoped and about a quarter (28%) heard that breast feeding was identified as a significant risk factor for transmitting HIV from mother to child. And two in five (43%) said—erroneously—that they heard news from the Conference that a vaccine for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, is now available.

## THE KAISER/HARVARD HEALTH NEWS INDEX

How closely Americans followed leading stories in the news from July 5 to July 31, 1998



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## WHAT THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS ABOUT HEALTH STORIES IN THE NEWS

### *Patients' Rights:*

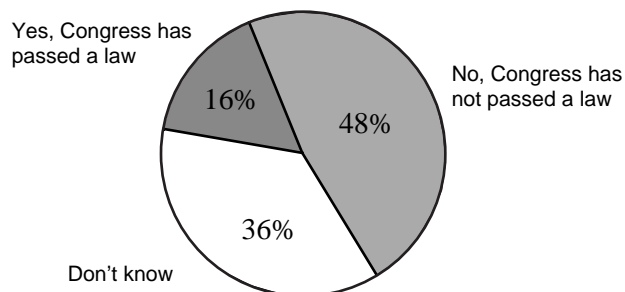
News stories in July included reports regarding the debate over whether Congress should pass laws to protect consumers in HMOs and other managed care health plans. Nearly half of Americans (48%) correctly stated that such legislation has not yet been passed. About one in five Americans (16%) incorrectly believed that Congress already passed a law to protect consumers in managed care, and about a third (36%) said they did not know.

A little more than half (55%) of those surveyed said, as far as they know, people in this country have the legal right to sue their health plan for inappropriately denying services or treatments. About a quarter of Americans (23%) said that people do not have the right to sue their plan and 22% said they didn't know if such a right exists.

### *Commission on the Future of Medicare:*

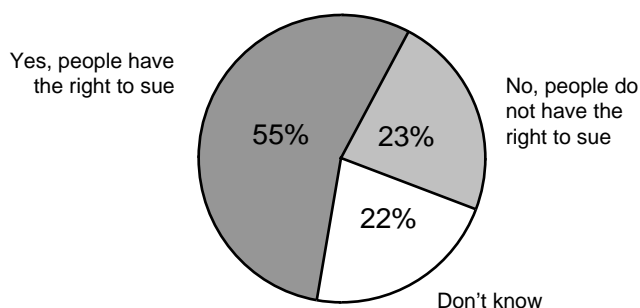
Only one in four Americans (25%) said they have been closely following news about the work of a national bipartisan commission on the future of Medicare slightly more (31%) knew that such a commission exists to study the program and make recommendations to the President and Congress (25% said no commission exists, 44% said they didn't know).

Has Congress passed a law to protect the rights of consumers in managed care plans?



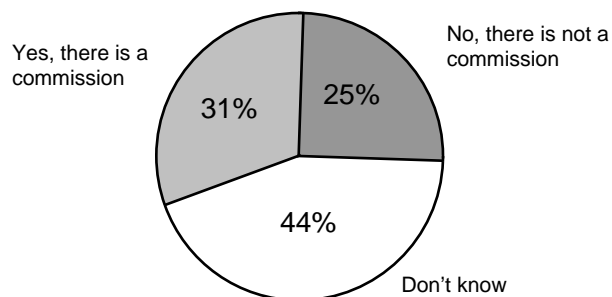
**Correct answer:** Congress has not passed a law

Do people in this country have the right to sue an HMO or managed care plan if the plan inappropriately denied services or treatments, or not?



**Correct answer:** Under the Federal ERISA law, people with employer-sponsored health insurance cannot sue their plans for economic or punitive damages.

National bipartisan commissions are sometimes created to study national problems and make recommendations to the President and Congress. As far as you know, is there a commission now studying the future of Medicare?



**Correct answer:** Yes, there is a commission.

The Kaiser/Harvard Health News Index is based on a national random sample survey of 1,200 Americans conducted August 6 - 20, 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.