

November/December 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 fifteenth report is based on a survey of 1,200 American adults. The survey asked respondents about major health issues covered in the news between November 1 and December 2, 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 November were the legal settlement between the tobacco industry and the states (66 percent) and the shooting of a doctor in Buffalo, New York who performed abortions (56 percent).

By comparison, 79 percent closely followed reports about events taking place in Iraq and 74 percent

closely followed the impeachment hearings in Congress concerning President Clinton (the survey was taken before the House of Representatives voted on impeachment.) Sixty-two percent followed the results of state and congressional elections. More than half of Americans (54 percent) followed the controversy surrounding Doctor Jack Kevorkian's videotaped assisted suicide on CBS' *60 Minutes*.

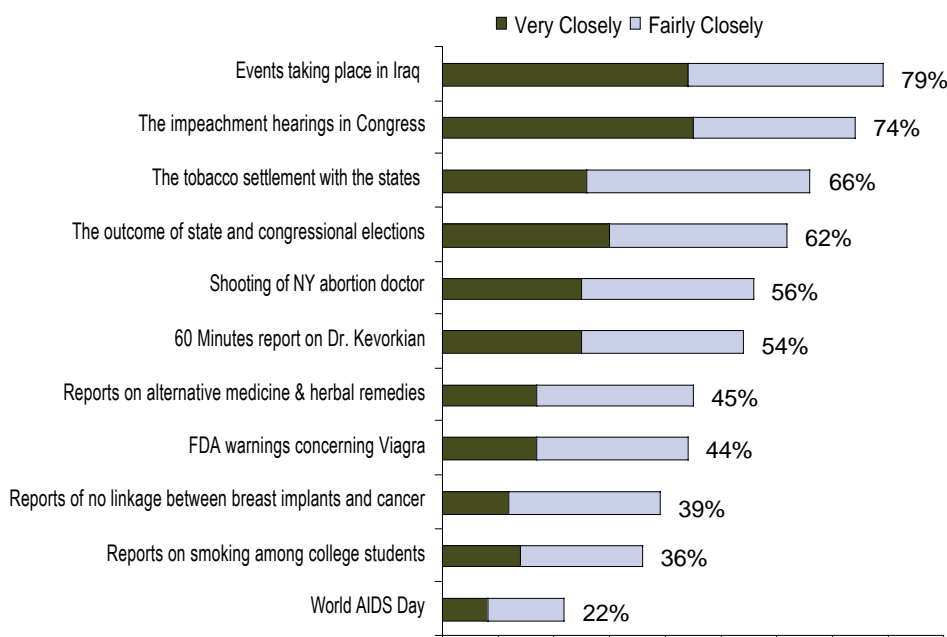
Among other health issues in the news, 45 percent closely followed recent reports on the use and effectiveness of alternative medicine and herbal remedies. Food and Drug Administration warnings about the male impotence drug Viagra were closely followed by 44 percent of the public.

Nearly 2 in 5 Americans (39 percent) paid close attention to the announcement by a panel of scientists that there is no evidence to suggest a linkage between breast implants and cancer. Thirty-six percent closely followed reports about an increase in smoking among college students.

Fewer Americans closely followed news about World AIDS Day (22 percent).

THE KAISER/HARVARD HEALTH NEWS INDEX

How closely Americans followed leading stories in the news from November 1 to December 2, 1998



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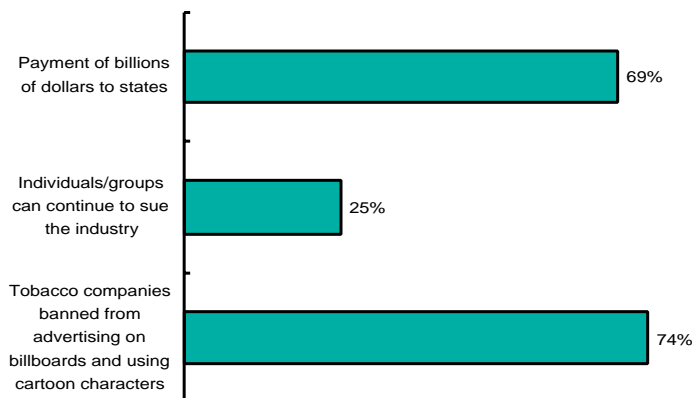
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WHAT THE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDS ABOUT HEALTH STORIES IN THE NEWS

The Tobacco Settlement:

News stories about the legal settlement between the tobacco industry and the states were among the most closely watched of the month. More than two-thirds of Americans knew that the settlement included the payment of billions of dollars to the states. An even larger percentage of Americans (74 percent) knew that the settlement including a ban on industry use of billboard advertising and cartoon characters. However, nearly 2 in 5 Americans erroneously thought that the deal included a ban on individual and class action lawsuits against the industry when, in fact, it continued to allow such lawsuits. Twenty-five percent correctly said that the ban was *not* part of the deal.

Which of the following were included in the settlement between the tobacco industry and the states (percent giving correct response)?

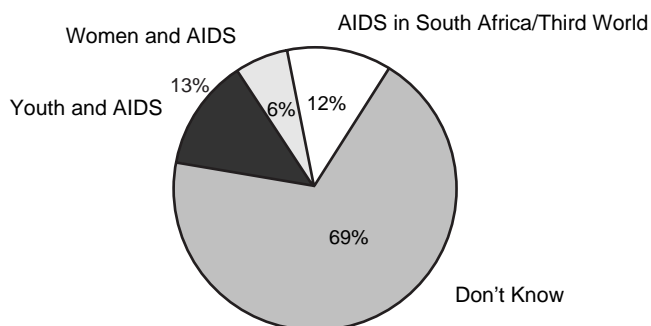


Correct Answer: Settlement included \$206 billion payment, retained the right of individuals and groups to sue, and banned billboard ads.

World AIDS Day:

Although nearly one-quarter of the public say they closely followed reports on the observation of World AIDS Day, few Americans knew the month (December) in which it is observed (12 percent). Furthermore, just 13 percent correctly identified the theme of this year's World AIDS Day as "Youth and AIDS". Nineteen percent gave incorrect answers and 69 percent said they did not know.

What was the theme of this year's World AIDS Day?



Correct answer: Youth and AIDS.

The Top Three Most Closely Followed General Health Stories of 1998

1. Tobacco (anti-smoking legislation in May and the legal settlement in late November)
2. The bombing of an abortion clinic in Birmingham, AL (late January)
3. The hope for a cure for cancer (throughout May)

The Top Three Most Closely Followed Health Policy Stories of 1998

1. President Clinton's proposed changes to Medicare (early January)
2. Consumer protection legislation for people covered by HMOs/managed care (mid July)
3. Reports about HMOs and other health plans pulling out of Medicare (September and October).

The Kaiser/Harvard Health News Index is based on a national random sample survey of 1,200 Americans conducted December 8-13, 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.