

CIGNA DROPS MAIL-ORDER REQUIREMENT FOR HIV DRUGS IN SETTLEMENT

NEW YORK: Health insurer Cigna Corp on Friday agreed to drop its requirement that patients with HIV/AIDS get some of their medications exclusively through its mail-order pharmacy, settling a consumer lawsuit. California-based advocacy group Consumer Watchdog, which announced the settlement on Friday, had sued Cigna in April in Florida federal court on behalf of a Fort Lauderdale man. They claimed the mail-order requirement discriminat-

ed against HIV/AIDS patients in order to boost profits. When the settlement takes effect on Dec 1, Cigna patients will be able to get their drugs at any in-network pharmacy. The group sought to represent a nationwide class of HIV/AIDS patients, but Cigna agreed to the settlement before the court certified the case as a class action.

Consumer Watchdog claimed that Cigna's policy of requiring patients to buy certain high-cost specialty

HIV/AIDS drugs through its mail-order program violated the Affordable Care Act, President Barack Obama's signature healthcare law, which prohibits discriminating on the basis of patients' medical condition. It said the program prevented patients from consulting with knowledgeable local pharmacists about the safety of their drug regimens, ran the risk of compromising their privacy when they received drugs in the mail and, in some cases, made the

drugs more expensive. Patients who paid more than they would have through a local pharmacy will be able to seek reimbursement under the settlement, Consumer Watchdog said. "This settlement will bring to a close a nerve-racking episode for patients with HIV and AIDS who face serious threats to their health and privacy," Jerry Flanagan, lead staff attorney for Consumer Watchdog, said in a press release. Cigna spokeswoman Karen

Eldred said the company had no comment on the settlement, which was finalized in court on Thursday.

Consumer Watchdog reached with United Healthcare and Anthem Blue Cross in July 2014 and June 2013, respectively. The case is John Doe, on behalf of himself and all others similarly situated plaintiffs, v Cigna Health and Life Insurance Co et al, US District Court, Southern District of Florida, No. 15-60894. — Reuters



AJACCIO, France: A man walks by wastes littering in a street at southern Corsica prefecture in Ajaccio on the French Mediterranean island of Corsica, as the island's main landfill is blocked by activists of environmental organizations protesting against plans to enlarge the site. — AFP photos

FRANCE'S CORSICA: FROM 'ISLE OF BEAUTY' TO 'ISLE OF TRASH' 'INTOXICATED BY A SMELL OF FREEDOM'

AJACCIO, France: Corsica, France's lush and feisty Mediterranean "isle of beauty", as it's known, has another nickname, the "scented isle" for its dense fragrant shrubs. Of late the moniker has taken on a tongue-in-cheek twist as the island faced a massive garbage problem. The crisis jettisoned Corsica back into French news headlines thanks to overflowing landfills and malodorous garbage left by the hordes of tourists who flock to

the Mediterranean jewel known for its vast sandy beaches, mountain vistas and rare animal and plant life.

Residents and tourists produce more than 300,000 tons of trash annually on Corsica, or the equivalent of more than 100,000 cars, and landfills are reaching full capacity. Rampant construction on the island also contributes vast amounts of waste. The rubbish problem got so bad that a union shut the landfills and

halted rubbish collections before finally agreeing to return to work late last month for the time being. A burgeoning population contributes to the growing garbage piles, with around 4,000 new residents arriving each year-adding to the 310,000 inhabitants already on the island.

It is not uncommon to see garbage bags in coastal nature reserves, and piled up after mobile homes come through. The crisis of overflowing bins is largely blamed on foreign holidaymakers. During peak tourist season, the population increases by tenfold, and around 20 percent of those tourists are foreigners. Several hikers have been fined for leaving trash on trails, particularly on the popular GR20 — which crosses Corsica diagonally north to south and is considered one of Europe's most beautiful mountain trails-frequented by thousands of tourists every year, according to Michel Acquaviva, head of parks on the island.

Acquaviva said that some of the foreign tourists may feel "intoxicated by a smell of freedom" on the island and dispose of their waste without thinking of the consequences. But that "smell of freedom" is quickly going off. Some

landfills, already saturated with rubbish from surrounding neighbourhoods, are refusing to take waste from other regions. France's Environment Minister Segolene Royal has called for action and urged for more regulation, calling the waste problem "particularly critical on Corsica".

Fed up with the waste

Only around 20 percent of Corsica's waste is recycled, which is close to the national average but well below countries like Germany (47 percent) and Slovenia (55 percent), according to EU's statistics agency Eurostat. This is primarily because waste is not sorted-so people end up tossing everything into the same bin, and it ends up in the same place. Some towns are taking the issue into their own hands. The small village of Girolata, on the western coast of Corsica, recycles around 80 percent of its rubbish, thanks to an efficient sorting system. The town's program works so well that it attracts official delegations, inspired by its waste management model. According to Mayor Francois Alfonsi, Girolata has invested 350,000 euros (HK\$97,000) in waste sorting and treatment. — AP



AJACCIO, France: A woman walks by wastes littering in a street.

US BOOSTS PRIVACY PROTECTION ON HEALTH INSURANCE WEBSITE

WASHINGTON: Responding to criticism from civil liberties advocates, the Obama administration said Friday it has strengthened consumer privacy protections on the government's health insurance website as a new sign-up season nears. HealthCare.gov CEO Kevin Counihan said in a blog post that the web page will have a new 'privacy manager' that lets consumers opt out of embedded connections to third-party advertising, analytics and social media sites. In addition, if a consumer has enabled the "Do Not Track" setting on their browser, the government will automatically honor their preferences as relates to

receiving digital advertising from HealthCare.gov.

The administration originally had said embedded third-party connections helped consumers have a better overall experience on HealthCare.gov. But The Associated Press reported earlier this year that the links could also result in personal information - including age, income, ZIP code, whether a person smokes and if a woman is pregnant - being sent to technology firms involved in marketing and advertising. A civil liberties group that previously had criticized the administration said the latest changes show a strong commitment to protecting privacy. Still,

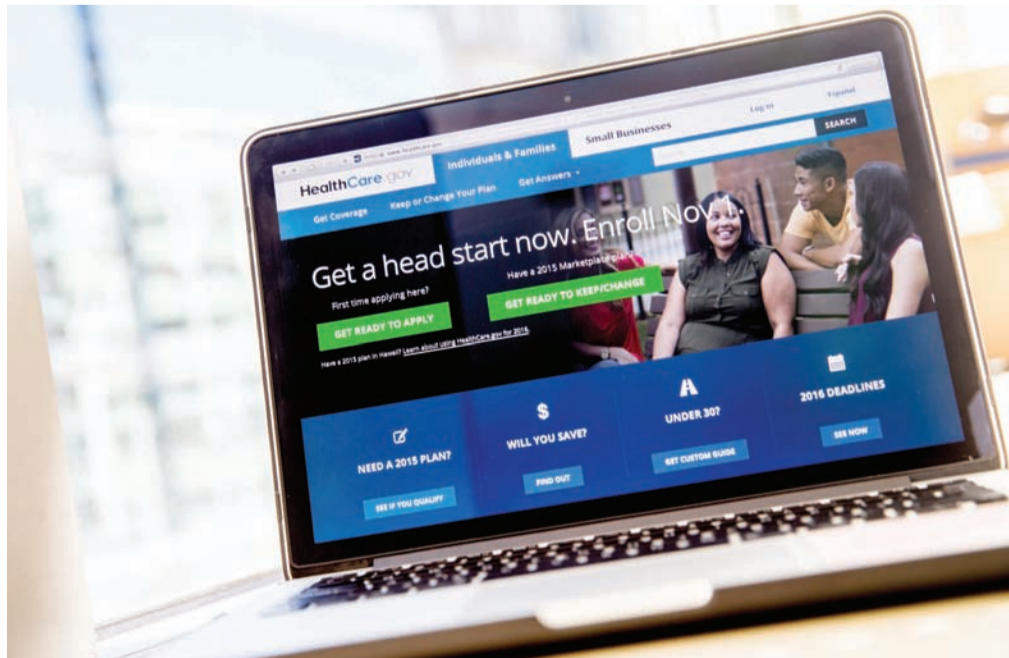
the Electronic Frontier Foundation said there's room for improvement. Administration officials said they are open to that.

Getting subsidized

"We applaud HealthCare.gov's decision to support 'Do Not Track' and give their users strong privacy controls," said Cooper Quintin, a staff technologist with the foundation. "We think that this is a great first step (and) would be thrilled to see more organizations, both public and private, follow their lead." HealthCare.gov's 2016 sign-up season starts Nov. 1, just a few weeks away. This will be the third open enrollment for taxpayer-subsidized private health insurance under President Barack Obama's law, and the administration is focusing on making the online health insurance markets more customer-friendly.

Also in the works are electronic tools to help consumers answer basic questions, such as whether the health plans they're looking at include their doctors and cover their medications. Another new feature will help customers get a better sense of their potential costs, not just premiums but deductibles and copays as well. About 10 million people are getting subsidized private coverage through federal and state insurance markets created by the law. Along with a Medicaid expansion now accepted by a majority of states and an improving economy, it's helped bring the number of uninsured people down to historically low levels - about 9 percent of the population.

The administration expects the remaining 10.5 million eligible uninsured people to be a tougher sell. Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia M. Burwell says that's because the most eager customers have already enrolled, and many of the remaining uninsured are young adults who may not see the value of coverage or are juggling tight household budgets. — AP



WASHINGTON: In this photo taken Oct 6, 2015, the HealthCare.gov website, where people can buy health insurance, is displayed on a laptop screen. — AP

TAI CHI CAN HELP BUILD STRENGTH, RELIEVE PAIN

LONDON: For people with chronic illnesses ranging from cancer to arthritis, Tai chi exercises may improve walking, build strength and reduce pain, according to a new analysis of past research. The slow and gentle movements of Tai chi, a modified form of an ancient Chinese martial art, may be especially suitable for middle aged and older people with multiple health conditions, the authors write in the British Journal of Sports Medicine.

"Given the fact that many middle-aged and older persons have more than one chronic condition, it is important to examine the benefits of treatment/exercise interventions across several co-existing conditions," lead author Yi-Wen Chen, from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, told Reuters Health by email. Chen's team analyzed results from 33 studies that looked at the effects of Tai chi among people with four chronic conditions: cancer, heart failure, osteoarthritis and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), a group of lung disorders that make breathing difficult. Some of them also had additional health problems.

Breathing control

Tai chi is a set of exercises that emphasize breathing control, whole body exercises with bent knees and slow, flowing movements. In addition to strength, it can help to improve posture, balance and concentration, the researchers note. The studies Chen and her colleagues collected had a total of more than 1,500 participants and used Tai chi as an intervention for any of the four chronic conditions.

The researchers assessed the effect of Tai chi on how far a person could walk in six minutes, lower body muscle strength, the time required to go from sitting to standing, quality of life and depression. The researchers also looked at the effects on specific symptoms of certain conditions, such as pain and stiffness in

osteoarthritis and breathing problems for people with COPD.

They found that performance on the six-minute walking test improved for both heart failure and COPD patients. Tai chi also improved knee strength in one heart failure study and one COPD study. Tai chi helped to decrease depression in heart failure patients, while other interventions such as stress management worked better than Tai chi for cancer patients. Tai chi did not improve blood pressure in heart failure patients. For osteoarthritis patients, the time taken to stand up, overall physical function, and general quality of life significantly improved with Tai chi. Symptoms of pain and stiffness were also markedly reduced.

Normal walking

Rhayun Song of Chungnam National University in Korea, who studies Tai chi's effect on osteoarthritis but wasn't involved in this new study, said Tai chi is well suited to people with chronic conditions who may have physical limitations. "Tai chi can be modified according to their physical condition (i.e., in sitting, standing, less bended knees, small steps, etc.) to perform it within their comfort zone," Song said by email.

Song also noted that an advantage of Tai chi over other exercise is the particular style of Tai chi walking, which is different from normal walking. In this exercise, a person first takes an "empty" step, then transfers the weight. This movement explains "why we can expect to see the improvement in knee muscle strength, balance, bone mineral density compared with other types of exercise," Song said. Chen advised that anyone starting a new exercise program should consult with their doctor to ensure it is safe. "This type of exercise can be enjoyable, improve fitness and well-being without aggravating symptoms," she said. — Reuters



FIDGETING WHILE YOU WORK MIGHT BE GOOD FOR YOU

NEW YORK: People who can't resist fidgeting while they work may want to stop trying to kick the habit, because a new study suggests all that toe tapping and pencil rapping may be good for their health. Previous research has linked long stretches of sedentary time - whether facing a computer or watching TV - with poor health outcomes even in people who get plenty of exercise, the researchers note in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

But in the new study, among women who sat around for five to six hours a day, heavy fidgeting was linked to a significantly lower mortality risk over the study period than staying perfectly still in their chairs. Janet Cade of the University of Leeds, UK, and her colleagues analyzed survey data from more than 12,000 women about their lifestyles, including how much time they typically spent sitting, how much they fidgeted, whether they exercised and what they ate and drank.

Over the course of about 12 years, on average, the low-fidgeters who were sedentary for at least seven hours a day had a 30 percent higher risk of death compared to those who sat for no more than five hours a day. But among women who fidgeted the most, sitting for five to six hours a day had a 33 percent lower risk of death during the study than being sedentary for less than five hours a day.

"If you have to sit for long periods of time even small movements such as fidgeting could be helpful," Cade said by email. She and her team analyzed survey data collected from 1999 to 2002 when the women were typically in their mid-50s.

About 42 percent of the women reported sitting for less than four hours daily, 32 percent said they were seden-

tary for five to six hours and another 26 percent spent seven to 17 hours a day sitting down. Overall, about 54 percent described themselves as not very fidgety, 20 percent said they fidgeted occasionally and about 27 reported a strong impulse to fidget most of the time.

Fruits and vegetables

The self-proclaimed habitual fidgeters got significantly more exercise and sleep than their calmer peers, but they also appeared less likely to eat fruits and vegetables and more prone to drinking and smoking. One shortcoming of the study is its reliance on the women to accurately report how much time they spent fidgeting and sitting, the authors acknowledge. They also didn't account for the women's weight.

It's also possible that although the study accounted for exercise, the data may not have painted a complete picture of whether or not women were constantly in motion as they went about their daily lives, noted Robert Newton, Jr, an exercise expert at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

"We currently do not know how vigorously people need to fidget to get a potential benefit," Newton, who wasn't involved in the study, said by email.

Fidgetiness may also be a marker of a person who is hard-wired to move around a lot, said Dr James Levine, a researcher at Arizona State University and the Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale, Arizona. "The fidget itself is actually a reflection of the brain sending out a signal to get moving," said Levine, who wasn't involved in the study. "If you can get out and walk around you do that, but if you are stuck behind a desk with a pile of work to do then you just make all the little movements you can." — Reuters