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Health Care Priorities: Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit and Strengthening Public Health System Seen by Public as More Important Issues than Patients' Bill of Rights or Medicare Reform

However large majorities see all of these as very important

The list of things people would like the government to do has always been, and will always be, longer than what it is possible for government to do. The art of government is in part focusing on, and addressing, a limited number of policies and programs. So it is with health care.

For this issue of *Harris Interactive Health Care News*, Volume 2, Issue 1, we decided to ask the public about four major public policy issues which may, or may not, be addressed by new legislation and the federal government in the near future.

All four of them are perceived to be "extremely" or "very" important by 73% or more of all adults nationwide. The main differences, when we asked about each issue separately, are the proportions that say that they are "extremely," as opposed to "very," important:

- 48% of all adults see the provision of a new **Medicare drug** benefit as extremely important, while 77% see it as extremely or very important
- 42% believe **strengthening the public health system** to detect, diagnose, treat and prevent infectious and other diseases as extremely important. 77% see this as extremely or very important.
- 37% see **reform of the Medicare program** to make sure it is financially strong as extremely important. 76% see this as extremely or very important.
- 37% believe that enacting a **patients' bill of rights** is extremely important. 73% see this as extremely or very important.

TABLE 1

Importance of Four Health Care Policy Issues

"The following are all things which the government could do in the health care field. For each one, please tell us how important it is to you"

		Extremely Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not At All Important	Extremely or Very Important
Providing a Medicare prescription drug benefit to make drugs more affordable to people over 65 and people with disabilities	%	48	30	18	5	77
Strengthen the public health system to detect, diagnose, treat and prevent infectious and other diseases	%	42	35	20	3	77
Reform of the Medicare program to make sure it is financially strong	%	37	39	21	3	76
Enacting a "patients' bill of rights" to protect members against some abuses of managed care	%	37	36	21	6	73

Which One Is Most Important?

While almost three-quarters of all adults see each of these four issues as very important, two of the four emerge as higher priorities for more people when they are asked to say which one is "most important." The two issues that top the list are the **Medicare drug benefit** (32%) and **strengthening the public health system** (30%).

The other two issues receive far fewer votes as the most important issue. Only 16% pick **Medicare reform** and 18% pick the **patients' bill of rights**, as the most important.

TABLE 2

Which one issue is most important?

"Which one of the following is most important to you?"

	All Adults	Age						Difference Between Those Aged 65+ and 18-24
		18-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50-64	65+	
Providing a Medicare prescription drug benefit to make drugs more affordable to people over 65 and people with disabilities	32	15	17	30	25	41	51	+36
Strengthen the public health system to detect, diagnose, treat and prevent infectious and other diseases	30	44	42	33	33	20	14	-30
Enacting a "patients' bill or rights" to protect members against some abuses of managed care	18	22	23	18	19	17	9	-13
Reform of the Medicare program to make sure it is financially strong	16	11	13	12	17	17	24	+13
Other/Not sure	5	8	5	7	6	5	1	+13

Differences by Age

On this question (which one issue is most important) there are big differences between different age groups. Older people are far more likely to choose the **Medicare drug benefit** and **Medicare reform**. Obviously this reflects the fact that older people are, or soon will be, Medicare beneficiaries. Younger people attach higher priorities to **strengthening the public health system** and enacting a **patients' bill of rights**.

For example:

- The **Medicare drug benefit** is the top priority for 52% of people over 65 but of only 15% of people under 25.
- **Medicare reform** is the top priority of 24% of people over 65% but of only 11% of people under 25.
- **Strengthening the public health system** is top priority of 44% of those aged 18-24 but of only 14% of people over 65.
- Enacting a **patients' bill of rights** is the top priority for 22% of people under 25 but of only 9% of people over 65.

Political Implications

As politicians view these results, they will note two things. First, that given the high likelihood of voters among older people, the two Medicare issues would score relatively higher if this question were limited only to voters. Secondly, that the two Medicare issues are much tougher to deal with. Any **Medicare drug benefit** which substantially reduces the out-of-pocket costs of medication for older people will be extremely expensive. And **Medicare reform** requires making very tough (and potentially politically damaging) choices, such as increasing taxes, raising out-of-pocket costs, reducing benefits or raising the age of eligibility.

Politicians will also note that even though strengthening the public health system is surely more important now because of the fear of bioterrorism, it does not displace the Medicare drug benefit from the top of the list.

These results come from a nationwide Harris Interactive survey of 2,053 adults conducted online between November 9 and 14, 2001, using the same methodology we used to accurately predict the 2000 elections. The data were weighted demographically to be aligned with the total U.S. adult population. We also used "propensity score" weighting.

About Harris InteractiveSM

Harris Interactive (Nasdaq: HPOL) is a worldwide market research and consulting firm, best known for *The Harris Poll*[®] and its pioneering use of the Internet to conduct scientifically accurate market research. Strengthened by its recent merger with Total Research Corporation, the Company now combines the power of technology with international expertise in predictive, custom, strategic research. Headquartered in the United States, with offices in the United Kingdom, Japan and a global network of local market and opinion research firms, the Company conducts international research with fluency in multiple languages. For more information about Harris Interactive, visit www.harrisinteractive.com. EOE M/F/D/V

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