

# New report details nursing home misuse of antipsychotics

By DAVID CRARY  
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NEW YORK — U.S. nursing homes have significantly reduced the use of powerful antipsychotic drugs among their elderly residents, responding to pressure from many directions. Yet advocacy groups insist that overmedication remains a major problem, and want the pressure to intensify.

According to the latest data from the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, known as CMS, the percentage of long-term nursing home residents being given antipsychotic drugs dropped from about 24 percent in late 2011 to under 16 percent last year. Decreases were reported in all 50 states, with the biggest in Tennessee, California and Arkansas.

Dr. Jerry Gurwitz, chief of geriatric medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, depicts the overall decrease as “one of the most dramatic changes I’ve seen in my career.” He wonders, however, if some nursing homes might be finding other medications that sedate their patients into passivity without drawing the same level of scrutiny as antipsychotics.

Advocacy groups — including the Washington-based Center for Medicare Advocacy and AARP Foundation Litigation — say even the lower rate of antipsychotic usage is excessive, given federal warnings that elderly people with dementia face a higher risk of death when treated with such drugs.

“Given the dire consequences, it should be zero,” said attorney Kelly Bagby of the AARP foundation, which has engaged in several court cases challenging nursing home medication practices. Bagby contends that the drugs are frequently used for their sedative effect, not because



This Aug. 2017 photo shows Laurel Cline during a visit to her mother Lenora, who has Alzheimer’s disease, in a nursing home in Whittier, Calif. Laurel says her mother, during stays at three different nursing homes in recent years, was sometimes left neglected for hours at a time in her wheelchair after being given antipsychotics.

they have any benefit to the recipients.

The advocacy groups’ long-running campaign was reinforced Monday with the release of a detailed report by Human Rights Watch urging federal and state authorities to take tougher measures against improper use of antipsychotic drugs.

“On paper, nursing home residents have strong legal protections of their rights, but in practice, enforcement is often lacking,” said the report, based on interviews with more than 300 people and visits to 109 nursing homes in six states.

Ten years ago, according to the Department of Health and Human Services, roughly 270,000 nursing home residents suffering from dementia were receiving antipsychotic drugs even though such

medications are not approved to treat that condition. The powerful class of drugs is intended, instead, to treat serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

Analyzing the latest government data, Human Rights Watch estimates there are now about 179,000 people in nursing homes who get antipsychotics every week without having a diagnosis for which the drugs are approved.

“Antipsychotic drugs alter consciousness and can adversely affect an individual’s ability to interact with others,” the new report says. “They can also make it easier for understaffed facilities, with direct care workers inadequately trained in dementia care, to manage the people who live there.”

The report also says that

nursing homes, in violation of government regulations, often administer antipsychotic drugs without obtaining consent from residents or the relatives who represent them.

Hannah Flamm, the report’s lead author, said the recent data showing a decline in antipsychotic usage demonstrated how extensive the overmedication problem had been. In an interview, she said the lower numbers don’t impress her.

“Would you want to go into nursing home if there’s a one in six chance you’d be given a drug that robs you of your ability to communicate?” she asked. “It’s hard for me to applaud the reduction when it’s inexcusable to ever misuse these drugs.”

The American Health Care Association, which represents more than 13,000 U.S.

nursing homes, was active in the national partnership formed by CMS in 2012 that worked to reduce unnecessary use of antipsychotics.

The association’s senior vice president for quality and regulatory affairs, Dr. David Gifford, said a majority of the organization’s members reduced usage by more than 30 percent, while some others failed to fully embrace the initiative.

The biggest challenge, Gifford said, is to change a mind-set among some nursing home staff and some residents’ families that behavior arising from dementia is “abnormal” and warrants the use of antipsychotics.

“There’s been dramatic improvement, but there’s room for more improvement,” he said.

Advocacy groups contend

“Instead of seeing what’s wrong with her, they just want to drug her up.”

— Laurel Cline, California woman whose mother has dementia

that federal enforcement of medication regulations has been too lax and will only grow more lenient as President Donald Trump’s administration pursues an agenda of deregulation.

“They’re helping the industry, not the patients,” said attorney Toby Edelman of the Center for Medicare Advocacy.

Gifford disagreed that enforcement was inadequate.

“The advocates want it to move faster, and I don’t blame them for wanting that,” he said. “But the approach being used is very successful.”

Gifford also disagreed with the suggestion that nursing homes used the antipsychotics as a sedative to compensate for staffing shortages.

“If someone is sedated, you need more staff,” Gifford said. “The amount of staff is related to how much people can do for themselves.”

Laurel Cline, a California woman whose 88-year-old mother has dementia, described a different scenario. She said her mother, during stays at three different nursing homes in recent years, was sometimes left neglected for hours at a time in her wheelchair after being given antipsychotics.

In each facility, Cline said, it was a struggle for her to convince management that those dosages should be stopped. On a few occasions, she said, staff members said her mother would have to leave the home if she were taken off antipsychotics.

“Instead of seeing what’s wrong with her, they just want to drug her up,” said Cline.

## BRIEFLY

### Senate stumbles into shutdown, as Rand Paul blocks vote

WASHINGTON (AP) — The government stumbled into a midnight shutdown Thursday as a rogue Senate Republican blocked a speedy vote on a massive, bipartisan, budget-busting spending deal, protesting the return of trillion-dollar deficits on the watch of Republicans controlling Washington.

A shutdown — technically a lapse in agency appropriations — became inevitable as GOP Sen. Rand Paul repeatedly held up votes on the budget plan, which is married to a six-week government-wide spending measure. The Senate recessed around 11 p.m. with plans to reconvene just after midnight.

Paul was seeking a vote on reversing spending increases and refused to speed things up when he was denied.

“I ran for office because I was very critical of President Obama’s trillion-dollar deficits,” the Kentucky senator said. “Now we have Republicans hand in hand with Democrats offering us trillion-dollar deficits. I can’t in all honesty look the other way.”

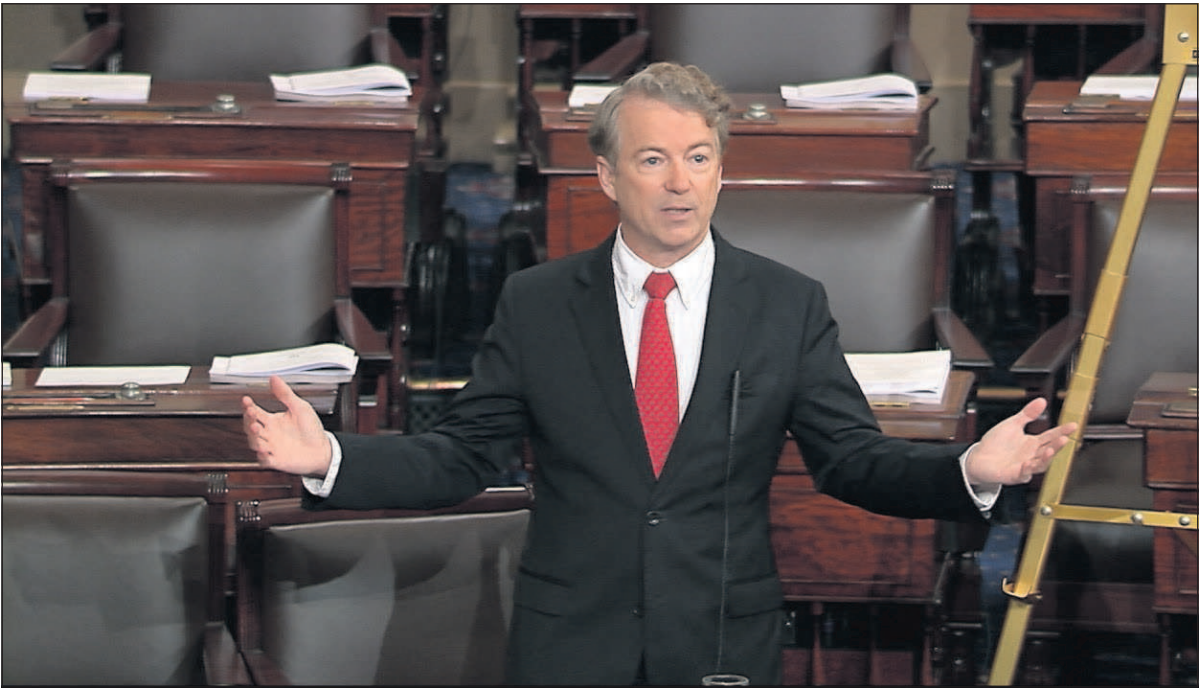
While the government’s authority to spend some money would expire at midnight, there weren’t likely to be many clear immediate effects. Essential personnel would remain on the job regardless, and it appeared possible — if not likely — that the measure could pass both the Senate and House before most federal employees were due to report for work.

### Kelly in harsh spotlight after senior aide’s resignation

WASHINGTON (AP) — Pressure mounted on White House chief of staff John Kelly Thursday as questions swirled about his defense of a senior aide he fought to keep in a highly sensitive West Wing job despite accusations of spousal abuse from two ex-wives.

White House staff secretary Rob Porter, a member of President Donald Trump’s inner circle and arguably Kelly’s closest aide, cleaned out his desk on Thursday. But the aftershocks of his resignation reverberated amid concerns about his access to classified information.

Kelly himself faced criticism for initially defending his aide — only to later shift course after the



In this image from video from Senate Television, Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., speaks on the floor of the Senate Thursday on Capitol Hill in Washington.

publication of photos showing one of Porter’s ex-wives with a black eye.

“It’s fair to say we all could have done better over the last few hours or last few days in dealing with this situation,” said White House deputy press secretary Raj Shah, who faced a barrage of questions about Kelly during a press briefing.

Though the allegations against Porter became public this week, Kelly learned last fall that something was amiss with the staff secretary’s attempts to get a security clearance, according to an administration official who insisted on anonymity to discuss internal matters.

### Syrian forces capture two members of Islamic State ‘Beatles’

WASHINGTON (AP) — The American-backed Syrian Democratic Forces captured two notorious British members of an Islamic State insurgent cell commonly dubbed “The Beatles” and known for beheading hostages, U.S. military officials said Thursday.

Air Force Col. John Thomas said that El Shafee Elsheikh and Alexandra Amon Kotey were captured in early January in eastern Syria. The two men are among four members of the IS cell that captured, tortured and beheaded more than two dozen hostages including American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff,

and American aid worker Peter Kassig.

The State Department has imposed sanctions on both men. They are believed to be linked to the British terrorist known as Jihadi John, the masked IS militant who appeared in several videos depicting the graphic beheadings of Western hostages.

Thomas, a spokesman for U.S. Central Command, said American officials have been able to interrogate the two detainees. And he characterized their capture as “certainly a big deal for America” as well as the families of the people the two men killed.

While the SDF discovered the two and captured them, the U.S. helped with biometric data and other tools to accurately identify them.

### Trump aims to reduce drug costs under Medicare

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump will propose lowering prescription drug costs for Medicare beneficiaries by allowing them to share in rebates that drug companies pay to insurers and middlemen, an administration official said Thursday.

A senior administration official outlined the plan on condition of anonymity ahead of the release of Trump’s 2019 budget plan next week.

Pharmaceutical companies now pay rebates to insurers and pharmacy benefit managers to help

their medications gain a bigger slice of the market.

Insurers apply savings from rebates to keep premiums more manageable.

Under Trump’s proposal, seniors covered by Medicare’s popular “Part D” prescription benefit would be able to share in the rebates for individual drugs that they purchase at the pharmacy.

### N. Korea delegation led by Kim’s sister arrives for Olympics

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — The plane carrying a high-level North Korean government delegation including leader Kim Jong Un’s sister has arrived in South Korea to attend the opening ceremony of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.

Kim Yo Jong will be the first member of North Korea’s ruling family to set foot in the South since the 1950-53 Korean War.

The North Korean officials during their three-day visit beginning Friday will meet with South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who’s trying to use the Olympics as an opportunity to pull North Korea into meaningful talks over its nuclear program.

Analysts say the North’s decision to send her to the Olympics shows its ambition to break out from diplomatic isolation by improving relations with the South, which it could use as a bridge for approaching the United States.

### Asian shares fall after Wall Street plunge

BEIJING (AP) — China’s stock market benchmark plunged 5.5 percent on Friday and other Asian markets were off sharply after the Dow Jones industrials on Wall Street plummeted more than 1,000 points, deepening a week-long sell-off.

Asian markets followed Wall Street down after the Dow entered “correction” territory for the first time in two years.

The Shanghai Composite Index dipped 5.5 percent but recovered slightly to end morning trading down 4.1 percent at 3,127.91. Tokyo’s Nikkei 225 was off 3.2 percent at 21,180.28 and Hong Kong’s Hang Seng fell 4.2 percent to 29,142.87. Benchmarks in Australia, South Korea and Southeast Asia also retreated.

Financial analysts regard corrections as a normal market event but say the latest plunge might have been triggered by a combination of events that rattled investors. Those include worries about a potential rise in U.S. inflation or interest rates and whether budget disputes in Washington might lead to another government shutdown.

“Markets are down again today, maybe unnerved by fears that the U.S. Senate will not pass a budget bill in time to avoid a U.S. government shutdown,” said Rob Camell of ING in a report. “With financial markets vulnerable at the moment, this was not great timing for such political brinkmanship.”

Chinese markets fell despite unexpected strongly trade data Thursday.

In Europe, markets were unnerved Thursday by the Bank of England’s indication that it could raise its key interest rate in coming months due to stronger global economic growth. Germany’s DAX lost 2.6 percent while France’s CAC 40 ended down 2 percent. Britain’s FTSE 100 fell 1.5 percent.

After hitting a high two weeks ago, U.S. stocks started to tumble last week after the Labor Department said workers’ wages grew at a fast rate in January. Investors worried rising wages will hurt corporate profits and could signal an increase in inflation that could prompt the Federal Reserve to raise interest rates at a faster pace, putting a brake on the economy.

Since then, the Dow and the Standard & Poor’s 500 have fallen 10 percent, Wall Street’s traditional definition of a correction.