

EDITORIAL

For sufferers with all-too-common ailment, Medicare patients left lacking key treatment

BY LORETTA JONES

As a gout patient, I can personally attest to the excruciating pain caused by gout, a painful form of arthritis. For those who are unfamiliar with the disease, a simple Google Images search of the word "gout" will speak volumes on just how unpleasant the disease can be.

This is why I was alarmed by recent news that thousands of gout-suffering seniors in California who are enrolled in Part-D Medicare plans are currently unable to access colchicine, a drug used by gout patients to treat flare-ups of the disease.

The problem stems from a commendable regulatory action recently taken by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), in which the agency removed

untested and unapproved versions of colchicine from the marketplace in order to protect patients from potentially harmful side effects. The FDA reports that dozens of deaths have been associated with unapproved colchicine. The good news is that there is an FDA-approved version available.

Surprisingly, before the FDA's removal of unapproved colchicine, many Medicare Part-D plans not only covered these untested drugs despite the health risks associated with their use, but they actually placed approved colchicine in a pricing tier so expensive that most Medicare patients could not access it.

Even more surprising is the fact these plans have left approved colchicine in this prohibitively expensive pricing-tier

despite it being the only choice available to patients.

Gout patients with Medicare undoubtedly chose their Part-D plans with their need for colchicine in mind. The fact that colchicine is no longer available to these patients despite being promised access to this drug when they enrolled in their plans is simply unacceptable. Making matters worse is that Medicare Part-D's open-enrollment period takes place only once a year and patients are locked into plans they sign up for until the next year's open enrollment period which takes place every November.

I can't imagine living a week without colchicine if my flares were acting up, and the fact that these Part-D providers could force patients to go without their drug until the next Medicare

Part-D open enrollment period in November is unthinkable.

The FDA helped keep patients safe by removing unapproved colchicine from the marketplace. Now, Part-D plans in California need to follow the lead of other Part-D providers throughout the country and move approved colchicine into an affordable pricing-tier. Gout patients who were promised their most important medication when they signed up for their Part-D plans should not suffer any more.

If the plans themselves fail to save their own enrollees from unnecessary suffering, maybe local lawmakers should step in and do what they must to fight for these unwilling victims.

Jones is founder and CEO of Healthy African-American Families.