Title: Patterns of Herbal and Nutritional Supplement Use in a Medicare Managed Care Population

Purpose/Objective: This study describes the use of such supplements by Arizona Medicare managed care enrollees.

Background: Recent studies suggest that Americans are increasing their use of herbal (e.g., saw palmetto, St. John’s Wort) and nutritional (e.g., glucosamine, melatonin) supplements, and vitamins/minerals to prevent illness and/or ameliorate disease symptoms.

Methods: Self-reported supplement, behavioral and attitudinal data were provided by managed care enrollees (n=827; 58.5% women, mean age 71.8 years (range 33-102); 65.5% married; 80.6% non-Hispanic White/11% African American/6.2% Hispanic). Logistic regression was used to assess predictors of the three categories of supplement use (herbal remedies, nutritional supplements, and vitamins/minerals) with significance set at p=0.05.

Results: Women were over twice as likely to report using vitamins and minerals (OR 2.18, p=0.002). Non-married (p=0.04) and non-smokers (p=0.05) were more likely to report nutritional supplement use. Ethnicity, age, and income were not predictive of supplement use in this population. Several behavioral and attitudinal variables were positively or negatively associated with use of supplements, however. For example, persons who ate few fresh fruits, vegetables, or milk products (p=0.006), or were not always able to shop, cook or feed themselves (p=0.02) were less likely to use vitamins and minerals. Persons who ate alone most of the time were over three times more likely to use herbal supplements (OR=3.20, p=0.03), while persons who felt “pretty worthless” were more likely to use nutritional supplements (OR=3.25, p=0.04). Enrollees who reported feeling that “life was empty” (p=0.03) were less likely to use vitamins and minerals, while enrollees who felt “down in the dumps” cited more vitamin use (OR=1.51, p=0.02).

Conclusions: Findings support prior studies of increased supplement use by women. Patterns of use among this Medicare population are complex. Future studies need to address positive and negative attitude in conjunction with herbal and nutritional supplement use, and determine whether or not supplementation can play a role in improving attitudes that will foster healing and or quality of life.