

A mother, facing the loss of her son's TennCare benefits, must choose between paying for care or putting him in a nursing home ...

'It's not a good decision'

BY JENNIFER WIG
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

JOHNSON CITY – The last time Nathan Desroches had his teeth cleaned, TennCare paid for everything.

When Desroches, who has cerebral palsy, goes in today for his cleaning, his mother will have to pay \$5,000 up front for the dentist and a room at the hospital.

Cerebral palsy, a group of problems related to brain injury, causes uncontrolled reflex movements and muscle tightness. Desroches, 28, must be hospitalized and under anesthesia to undergo

See **DECISION**, Page **A5**

THERE'S MORE

A federal judge on Wednesday issued a new order that gives the state even more power to restrict pharmacy benefits. **Page B1**

A LOOK AT TENNCARE CHANGES

No pharmacy benefit

■ 191,000 – Adults in TennCare Standard. They received request for information forms, "brown forms," on June 6 and are losing TennCare coverage unless they qualify for Medicaid.

Five-prescription limit

■ 379,000 – Adults who are Medicaid eligible and remaining on the TennCare program.

Unlimited pharmacy coverage

■ 650,000 – Children; no children are affected by disenrollment or pharmacy changes.

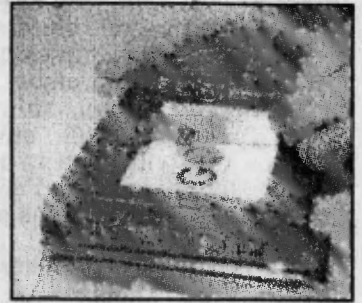
■ 32,400 – Institutionalized adults.

Includes people in nursing homes, home and community-based programs and facilities for the mentally disabled.

■ 97,000 – "Medically needy" adults.

They received a 10-day extension from the state while it analyzes the court ruling that could save enough money to keep them on the program. The extension expires Monday.

■ A 30-day notice was mailed to all enrollees affected by the pharmacy changes.



DECISION: Loss of benefits forces tough choices

From Page A1

any dental care.

"They're saying because he's over the age of 21, dental care is not covered," said his mother, Christine Gilbert. "What makes me mad is that it would be covered if he was in a nursing home."

This week marks a turning point for TennCare patients, and the loss of some services isn't the only change. As of Monday, about 379,000 adults were limited to five prescriptions per month.

Of those five, only two can be brand-name drugs. Those exempted from the five-per-month limit include children and people in institutions such as nursing homes.

In addition, some 107,000 adults on TennCare have received notices of coverage termination, and another 84,000 likely will lose coverage in the next few months.

Another 97,000 TennCare patients known as "medically needy" have unlimited prescription coverage until Monday. Attorneys for those enrollees said they hoped to retain coverage for their clients in the face of a federal judge's ruling Wednesday that gave the state even more power to restrict pharmacy benefits.

Gov. Phil Bredesen has said he hopes to make a decision this week about continuing coverage for the medically needy.

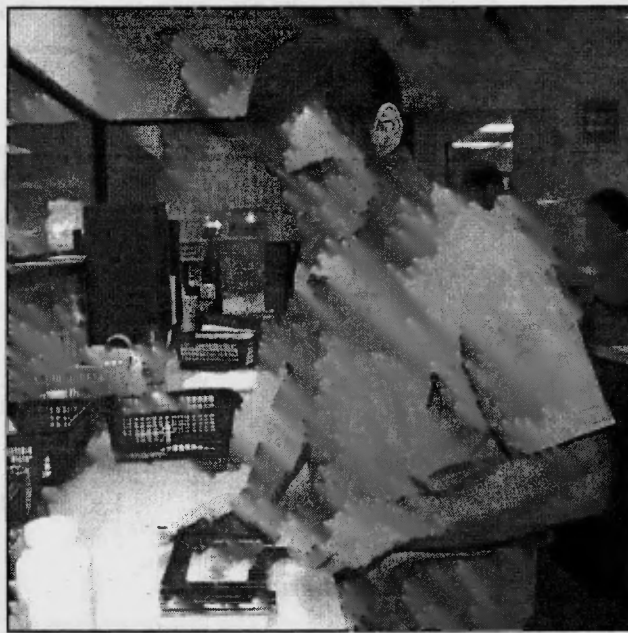
The changes are part of Bredesen's remedy for the financially troubled public insurance program. The increased use of prescription drugs has been labeled one of TennCare's biggest costs.

Marilyn Elam, spokeswoman for the TennCare Bureau, said the pharmacy changes could save the state as much as \$46.3 million. Without changes, Bredesen estimated TennCare would cost another \$650 million this year.

Gilbert's son takes five prescriptions, so he won't be affected by the new limitations, but she has had difficulty getting both of the pain medications he needs.

Doctors estimate her son has only one or two years to live. He has spent his life in a hospital bed at home.

Gilbert said her son would be confused by the sudden change if she decided to put him in a nursing home, but it may be her only option. His gums are red and bleeding, and he's been grinding his teeth, she said.



DAVID CRIGGER/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Pharmacist Jamie Dixon fills a prescription at Anderson Compounding Pharmacy in Bristol.

DISENROLLMENT BY THE NUMBERS

107,000 – Adults have received termination notices as of Aug. 1. TennCare is mailing, on average, about 1,900 termination notices each business day. The notice provides 20 more days of coverage.

84,000 – Adults are being processed by the state Department of Human Services to see whether they qualify for Medicaid. They have not received termination notices yet.

191,000 – Maximum number of adults who could lose TennCare coverage if the 97,000 medically needy population remains covered.

288,000 – Maximum number of adults who could lose TennCare coverage if the 97,000 medically needy population is not covered.

SOURCE: TennCare Bureau

"It just seems there should be special circumstances for people with disabilities," she said. "I want to keep him home, but I can't keep him and get his dental care and meds."

"I keep thinking if you love someone you have to set them free, but he wouldn't get it. He'd think, 'She's given up on me.'"

A computer system set up statewide keeps track of prescriptions in real time so pharmacists can monitor whether a patient has reached the limit.

Most of the changes have gone smoothly from an operational standpoint, according to Elam.

Some TennCare patients have been surprised by changes in the system, she said. Those who have received termination notices will have a total of 50 days' notice before their benefits end.

"There are often a handful of enrollees who simply don't believe the change is going to affect them until it actually takes effect, and they try to access services they're no longer entitled to," she said.

Cleve Anderson, pharmacist and owner of Anderson Compounding Pharmacy

in Bristol, said TennCare's changes have been difficult for him and his employees.

"It's mass confusion with TennCare," he said. "The people are confused because they come in here and think they can get all their prescriptions. They received (notice) in the mail, but they don't understand."

Anderson said he has been working with patients to find cheaper versions of some medications and telling people with more than five prescriptions to talk to their doctors about which drugs might be eliminated.

Gilbert might have to eliminate one drug from her son's list of prescriptions but said she worries mostly about the state of his teeth.

She cannot afford to pay more than \$5,000 every time her son needs a teeth cleaning, but said she does not want him to spend his last months of life in a nursing home.

"I have to make these decisions," she said. "Do I let him stay home and let his teeth fall out or do I let him be scared and confused? It's not a good decision. But I don't have a choice."

jwig@bristolnews.com | (276) 645-2518

TO FIND HELP

Those needing help paying for prescription medications may call (888) 4PPA-NOW (477-2669) or go to www.pparxn.org.