

CONCORD
Arts Alley is about to
'cowboy up' • B1



FLOODED
Waters rise again
on Seacoast • A6

NH LIFE
Getting lost with the
Retro Roadtripper • D1

"There is
nothing
so powerful
as truth"
DANIEL WEBSTER



NEW HAMPSHIRE
SUNDAY NEWS

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PRIMARY POLITICS

Expect more twists and turns in run-up to a historic primary

VOTERS FIRST
2024
FIRST IN THE NATION PRIMARY
Coming next week
Your guide to the candidates and their positions on key issues in the Jan. 23 presidential primary. Next weekend in the Sunday News.

■ Christie's departure and the results from Monday's Iowa caucuses could further scramble the GOP race.

By **Kevin Landrigan**
Union Leader Staff

It's already historic, and with nine days before voters head to the polls, the New Hampshire presidential primary could generate even more twists and turns.

Never has the first-in-the-nation contest featured an incumbent president who refuses to run here, and, in the other party, a former

president who dominates a crowded field while polarizing so many nationally.

A University of New Hampshire Survey Center poll last week found that former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley had drawn within single digits of former President Donald Trump here.

"We have not seen this dynamic where you have someone (Trump) so wildly popular with the base but

so unpopular with swing voters," said Andy Smith, the center's director.

"This race really comes down to how many uninvolved voters get off the couch and decide, each for their own reasons, that they can't afford to sit this one out."

In 2016, Trump's first primary win here set the record for GOP turnout, with 287,633 casting ballots.

Four years later, Democrats set the current mark, when 300,368 voted in the scramble that Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders narrowly won

over now-Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar.

Joe Biden finished fifth, but got back on the path to the nomination 18 days later with a blowout win in South Carolina.

Greg Moore, regional director of Americans for Prosperity, said the AFP model forecasts 330,000 to 340,000 will vote in the Republican primary on Jan. 23.

"We believe that a huge number of less and less engaged people are

► See **Primary**, Page A9

HEALTH

Melatonin use on the rise as a sleep aid for young children

■ Experts say if kids aren't sleeping, it's better to find out why and create better habits.

By **Shawne K. Wickham**
Sunday News Staff

The poison control center in Maine has fielded hundreds of calls in recent years from New Hampshire parents whose children have ingested melatonin.

The increase in such reports aligns with the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. That's not a coincidence.

Studies have found that more Americans started using melatonin to help them sleep during those anxious years. Now more parents are giving their kids melatonin to get them to sleep.

A recent visit to a chain drugstore in Concord found an entire shelf devoted to melatonin for children.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recently issued a health advisory about melatonin use in children and adolescents, noting it is now the second-most popular "natural" product parents give to their children, next to multivitamins.

The academy cited a 2017 study that found that levels of melatonin varied widely across brands, from less than one-half to more than four times the amount stated on the label.

"Before starting melatonin or any supplement in their children, parents should discuss this decision with a pediatric health care professional," the academy states on its website. "Many sleep problems can be better managed with a change in schedules, habits, or behaviors rather than taking melatonin."

Melatonin is a hormone-like substance that is produced naturally in the pineal gland, said Dr. Jennifer Pelli Packard, a physician at Bedford Center Internal Medicine and Pediatrics, a Catholic Medical Center outpatient primary care office. "It determines circadian — or sleep — rhythm," she said.

But giving kids extra melatonin to get them to sleep "is a little bit of a Band-Aid," Packard said.

If a child isn't sleeping, "there's something else that we need to address," she said. "Taking melatonin doesn't get at the root cause."

Sleep problems could be caused by something medical, such as sleep apnea from enlarged tonsils, or by anxiety, which has been increasing among kids, Packard

"Taking melatonin doesn't get at the root cause."

DR. JENNIFER PELLI PACKARD
pediatrician

► See **Melatonin**, Page A8

NH'S HEALTH CARE WORKFORCE

Condition: Improving



Above: Registered Nurse Jennifer Gancarz removes a patient's IV and prepares her for discharge in Catholic Medical Center's Elective Orthopedic Unit on Friday.

Right: Nurse Case Manager Laura Coidakis of Weare makes phone calls Friday at Catholic Medical Center.



PHOTOS BY ALLEGRA BOVERMAN/
UNION LEADER

Hospitals chip away at state's nursing shortage

By **Michael Cousineau**
Union Leader Staff

Online job openings for registered nurses in New Hampshire shot up 61% in late 2023 compared with a year earlier, according to state employment figures, a sign of growing health care demands.

But at least a few hospitals are making progress in what's become a perennial struggle to hire nurses.

Catholic Medical Center in Manchester reported that staffing of registered nurses was "a little better" compared with the previous year, according to Jennifer Cassin, the chief nursing officer.

The hospital brought on more than 80 nurses over the summer, a combination of experienced nurses and recent nursing graduates, Cassin said.

Dartmouth Health counts about 400 current RN openings but is making progress.

"Without taking growth into consideration, we have slightly fewer openings than last year," said Carolyn Isabelle, DH's director of workforce development and planning.

"We've been able in the last year to recruit and hire more new grad nurses, which is starting to impact the number of openings we have, which is a real step forward," Isabelle said.

The New Hampshire Hospital Association points out that registered nurses are in demand not only by hospitals but also by nursing homes, home-care organizations and other parts of the state's health care system.

"Vacancies are not new. This is something we've seen for the last several years," said Steve Ahnen, the group's president.

"Pre-pandemic, we were looking at a roughly 10% vacancy rate in RNs across the state," he said. "That shot up pretty dramatically, and shortly after the pandemic went to 20%. We're now around 17%."

According to New Hampshire

► See **Nursing**, Page A8

INDEX

Abby/Advice	D2	Lotteries.....	A2
Books	D5	Obituaries	D7-8
Classified.....	C5-6, D10	Puzzles	D6
Editorial.....	B4-5	Tonight's TV	D5

The weather

Snow showers
Forecast, D10



Last week's markets

S&P 500 ▲	Dow Industrials ▲	NASDAQ ▲
+80.13 (1.70%)	+265.61 (0.71%)	+408.29 (2.80%)

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Nursing

From Page A1

Employment Security, there were 3,508 job openings for RNs in November and December, compared with 2,179 the previous year and 1,282 in late 2019.

The pandemic struck in 2020, eventually convincing some nurses caring for COVID-19 patients in difficult situations to leave the profession.

Also “the demand for health care has gone up significantly” since the pandemic started, as more people waited to seek medical attention for medical needs that grew worse, Ahnen said.

People put off getting a colonoscopy or other tests that might have caught something needing medical attention sooner, resulting in people facing more serious medical issues now.

“That is contributing to the higher demand” across the health care spectrum, Ahnen said.

Today, hospitals and other health care providers are dealing with patients with COVID, the flu and other seasonal illnesses, resulting in nurses and hospital staff getting sick and creating further staff shortages, Ahnen said.

Many needs, many strategies

Staffing shortages in long-term care facilities also affect the flow of hospital patients.

“When that person can’t be discharged, they stay in the hospital and patients who need to get in are delayed getting in,” Ahnen said.

The nursing shortage “is getting worse and it’s going to potentially get to be even more of a problem as the baby boomers retire,” said



ALLEGRA BOVERMAN/UNION LEADER

Registered Nurse Jennifer Gancarz, director of the Elective Orthopedic Unit at Catholic Medical Center in Manchester, gathers supplies to remove the IV of a patient getting ready to go home on Friday.

Donna Driscoll, director of the Plymouth State University nursing program.

She hears from employers seeking nursing grads. “I get at least two emails a week from hospitals all over the country trying to recruit our students,” Driscoll said.

Plymouth State has a program for associate-degree nurses to come there to complete their bachelor’s degrees, transferring credits from the state’s community colleges.

Driscoll said she finds many soon-to-be grads “are really interested in

“We recognize we’re going to need to bring in more early-career nurses.”

CAROLYN ISABELLE
director of workforce development and planning,
Dartmouth Health

travel nursing” to see different places and often make more money before settling into a specific location.

“Students pretty much have jobs before they graduate,” she said.

At Dartmouth Health,

new grad nurses were hired at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon last year, about double the year before.

The health care system has a partnership with Colby-Sawyer College in New London for nurse graduates and also gets some new nurses from community colleges.

Nursing grads from the community colleges generally are older than those attending traditional colleges and sometimes are people starting a new career, she said.

“It’s through some crucial academic partnerships and intentional strategy on our end,” Isabelle said. “We recognize we’re going to need to bring in more early-career nurses.”

A little more than 200

Across the country, some nurses are returning to the health care industry.

Nurses’ changing priorities

A report last year by NSI Nursing Solutions Inc. said hospitals across the country were able to bring back nearly 6% of the talent lost when people left the profession after taking care of COVID-19 patients.

“I’m sure that’s happening here as well,” Isabelle said.

To recruit talent to a rural area, Dartmouth Health subleases about 170 apartments for some employees, including RNs, who also may qualify for financial rental assistance.

“It is based on (job) role and income,” she said.

A rental network helps others find apartment openings.

Kristine DiFiore, vice president of human resources at CMC, said she has seen a shift in priorities since the pandemic hit.

“I think the pandemic made us all stop and evaluate where we were in our lives and how we would go forward,” she said.

“2019 was landing the next job and what would pay the highest pay,” DiFiore said. “Now, I want to join a place that will improve safety” and offer a better workplace balance, she said.

CMC’s Cassin said hospital recruitment is starting earlier.

“We really put a lot of effort into getting out there and meeting with colleges early on,” she said. “We do a lot of affiliations with many colleges in the area which helps promote that attachment to CMC. They get the feel of the culture at CMC.”

Melatonin

From Page A1

said. Caffeinated beverages such as energy drinks could prevent adolescents from sleeping.

Prevalent with preschoolers

Pediatricians say parents need to know that melatonin, which is sold over the counter, is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration — but as a dietary supplement, not a drug like acetaminophen or ibuprofen.

When it comes to over-the-counter supplements, “It ends up being a little bit of the Wild West,” said Dr. Erik Shessler, associate medical director at Dartmouth Health Children’s.

Shessler, past president of New Hampshire Pediatrics Society, said it’s important for providers to ask parents about any supplements children are taking, including melatonin. In his experience, “If you end up asking, you’ll end up finding a lot of families have tried it at some point in time,” he said.

A University of Colorado-Boulder survey of 1,000 parents found that nearly 1 in 5 school-aged children and preteens takes melatonin for sleep. The survey, published in November in the journal JAMA Pediatrics, also found that nearly 6% of preschoolers ages 1 to 4 had been given melatonin in the previous month.

CMC pediatrician Packard has concerns about this trend. “It’s shocking because in Europe, you need a prescription for melatonin,” she said.

Both Shessler and Packard said parents should talk with their pediatricians before they give melatonin — or any over-the-counter product — to their kids.

They counsel parents to try some simple changes to improve kids’ sleeping habits first: turning off electronic devices an hour before bedtime, limiting access to violent or scary content, and creating a sleep-conducive environment. That means no television or phones in the bedroom, cooler temperatures and dark rooms.

Sticking to regular bedtime and wake-up time is important, even on weekends.

“That helps promote a consistent circadian rhythm,” Packard said. “You need to establish good habits early and maintain them.”

Useful for time changes

Melatonin to promote sleep first gained popularity with pilots and military personnel who had to deal with changing time zones,



SHAWNE K. WICKHAM/SUNDAY NEWS

An entire shelf at a Concord chain drugstore features melatonin products for children.

Shessler said. One of the first medical uses was to help blind people regulate their circadian rhythms.

When you take melatonin, Shessler said, “You’re essentially giving your body a little extra to essentially help it be a bit calmer and a little bit drowsier when you’re trying to go to sleep.”

Melatonin can be useful in helping to reset your body clock — after travel or vacation, for example, Shessler said. But he said, “most of us probably make enough melatonin on our own that we don’t really need to supplement.”

There are many strategies parents can employ to get their kids into healthy sleep habits, he said. Try quiet music, reading, and drinking chamomile tea or warm milk to help kids settle down before bed, he suggested.

“Learning how to fall asleep and learning how to calm ourselves down and get into a routine is a skill that we all have to learn,” he said. “Our bodies tend to thrive on consistency, especially when we’re talking about sleep.”

Getting little kids to go to sleep can be a struggle, acknowledged Shessler, who has young children himself. “It’s a challenge that we have all had for thousands and thousands of years,” he said.

“We figured it out thousands of years ago without melatonin supplements.”

“Learning how to fall asleep and learning how to calm ourselves down and get into a routine is a skill that we all have to learn.”

DR. ERIK SHESSLER
associate medical director,
Dartmouth Health Children’s

Potentially dangerous

With more melatonin in our homes, the chances of little kids getting into it are higher — especially when it comes in the form of gummies, with colors and flavors that appeal to kids.

A study published in the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report in 2022 found that 260,435 cases of pediatric ingestion of melatonin were reported to poison centers between 2012 and 2021. Those reports have increased sharply in recent years — and New Hampshire is part of that trend.

The number of New Hampshire cases of children ages 12 and under who were exposed to melatonin, reported to the Northern New England Poison Center

in Maine, rose from 71 in 2014 to 162 in 2023.

Most of those — 143 last year — were classified as “general unintentional exposure,” said Dr. James Watson, a medical toxicologist with the center. “Meaning, they’re a kid, and they see something and they put it in their mouth, because that’s what kids do,” he said.

Those numbers represent only the parents who were worried enough to call.

In response to that 2022 CDC report on melatonin, the Consumer Healthcare Products Association issued a statement, noting, “Melatonin is a safe and beneficial dietary supplement for adults and children, regulated by the FDA, and consumed by millions of Americans to support and promote healthy sleep and wellness when used as directed on Supplement Facts labels.”

The trade group agreed with the CDC’s call for initiatives to prevent accidental exposures to melatonin, including the “Up and Away” public awareness campaign (upandaway.org)

NNEPC’s Watson wants parents to know that dietary supplements have “vastly different amounts of regulatory oversight” than pharmaceuticals such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen. “It’s dangerous to assume that anything over the counter is safe,” he said.

“A lot of times those companies will put something like ‘all natural’

or ‘organic’” on the label, he said. “That phrasing doesn’t exonerate the product from being potentially dangerous or contaminated. Those are marketing terms.”

If parents are considering giving their children melatonin, “It should only be done after a conversation with a pediatrician, to make sure that there’s no specific reasons why for your child it would not be a good idea,” Watson said. “Also to get on the same page about dosing.”

Watson, who also is an emergency medicine physician at Maine Medical Center, said most children who ingest melatonin accidentally are asymptomatic or have no ill effects. Most common symptoms are mild sedation or sleepiness, he said, but “we have gotten a couple of calls where kids have nausea or vomiting or diarrhea.”

If a child does get into something, Watson urges parents to call the poison center, which is open 24/7 and staffed by specially trained pharmacists and nurses.

“We will be able to talk with you over the phone and give you guidance on things to watch out for, and help make that determination as to whether your child needs to be evaluated at an emergency department or whether it’s safe to keep them at home.”

The Northern New England Poison Center can be reached by calling 1-800-222-1222, chatting online or texting POISON to 85511.