

aged care system also looked into Agilon's conduct and found instances in which its patients were harmed.

In an interview, Inland Empire CEO Bradley Gilbert said Agilon denied a patient's transfusions for anemia, causing the person to be hospitalized. It also improperly denied cardiac rehabilitation to a patient recovering from a heart attack, he said.

Inland Empire canceled its contract with Agilon's Vantage Medical Group in August, he said.

Agilon's June report depicts an operation that was often stretched thin: Nurses were handling 120 to 200 requests for care per day, on average, with no full-time medical director to review the findings.

From 2014 until May, the company relied on a family physician who was working 10 to 12 hours a day running his own medical practice, according to the report.

Dr. Reuel Gaskins was busy seeing his own patients at the Hampton Medical Clinic in Riverside, where a red neon sign flashes "Open" in the front window. In an interview,

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Gaskins said he reviewed cases during breaks throughout the day and after normal work hours. He said he left Agilon in April.

Ultimately, Agilon's internal investigation found that patient care may have been denied 439 times since 2014 without a physician's review of the medical records—a potential violation of state law. Under California law, only a licensed physician or health care professional who is "competent to evaluate the specific clinical issues involved" can determine medical necessity.

Gaskins said he was not aware of allegations that medical decisions were made without his review until he was interviewed by Agilon's lawyers.

"That's inappropriate and unacceptable," he said. "It really bothered me when I heard about it."

The June report also found that Villa helped alter 20 files at the

request of a supervisor in 2014 so her employer could pass an upcoming audit by an insurer.

A "manager told me to do it," Villa said in an interview. "They were so adamant that everything look perfect for the auditors."

A few days after the company's lawyers made that discovery, Agilon sent Villa home on paid leave, the nurse said. She said that when she returned to work in August, she found she had been replaced as denial nurse, and shortly after that, she was fired.

Meanwhile, in recent months, Agilon has mended its relationships with some insurers and won new Medicaid contracts.

Consumer advocates worry that the concerns surrounding Agilon and SynerMed signal a much larger problem in the burgeoning Medicaid managed-care industry.

"These private entities get very little oversight," said Linda Nguy, a policy advocate at the Western Center on Law & Poverty in Sacramento, "and there's real harm being done to patients." □

WEEKLY DOSE



'Drynuary'

Among the New Year's resolutions related to wellness—lose weight, exercise, eat healthier—an import from Britain has taken root. It's **Dry January**, also known as **Drynuary**, a month-long pledge to forgo alcoholic beverages. The challenge launched seven years ago; last year, 4 million people participated, according to organizer **Alcohol Change UK**. Turns out the reprieve can yield longer-lasting benefits. According to a study published Dec. 28 from researchers in England, avoiding alcohol for a month can reduce blood pressure, lead to weight loss, improve insulin resistance and reduce levels of a protein that's been linked to cancer. Other benefits include a sense of achievement, money savings and better feelings of self-control.

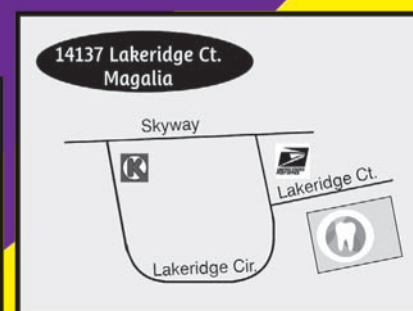
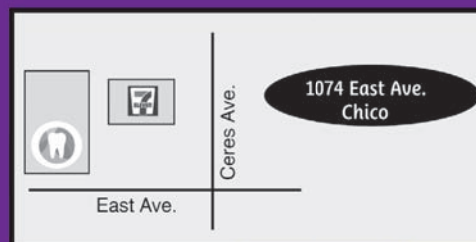
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