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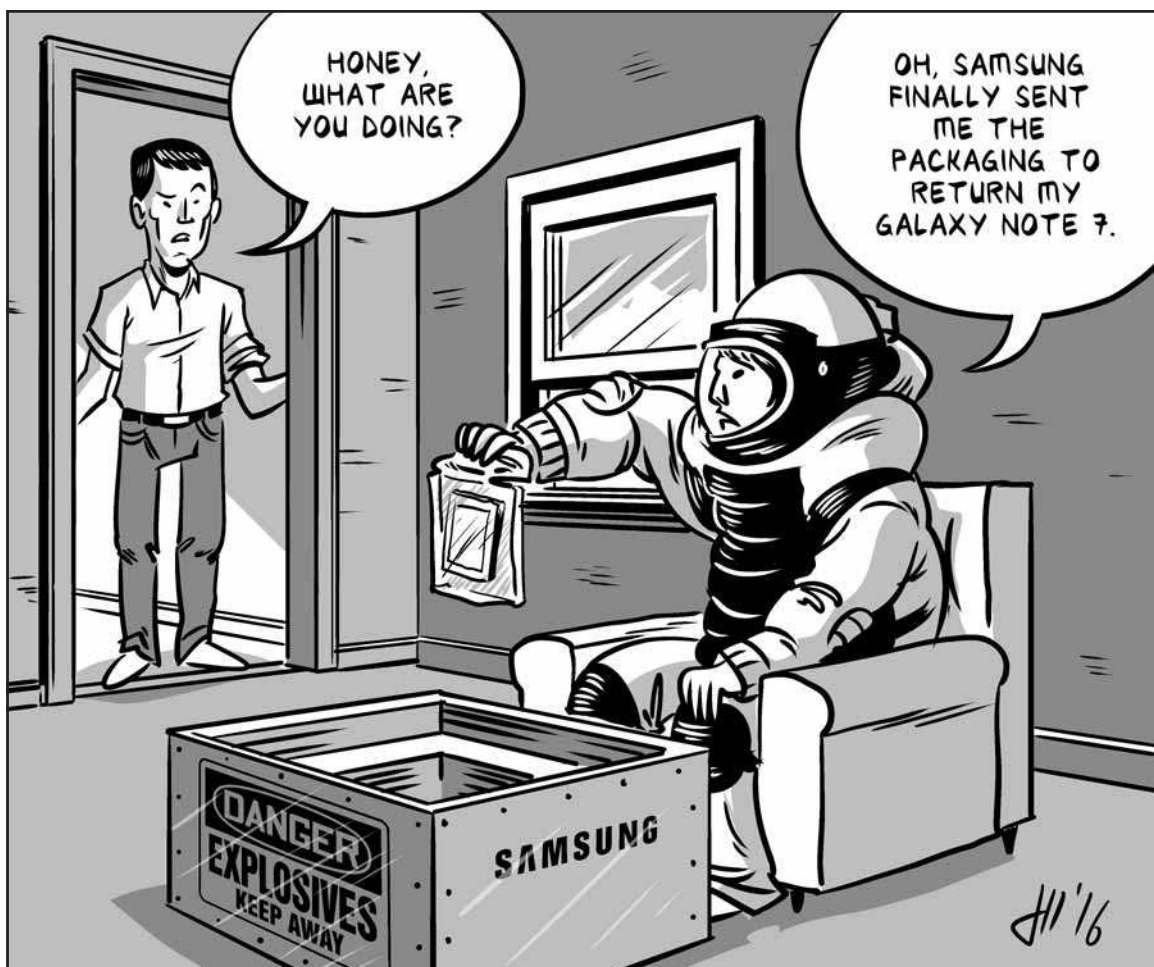
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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



My health scare

This summer was a tough one. First my kitty Joey had a stroke then died after two weeks of caregiving. A week later, I went in for a routine mammogram and was told I needed an ultrasound. After the ultrasound, a nurse called and said I needed to schedule a needle biopsy. The lab results confirmed it was mostly benign except for a “small spot” the biopsy couldn’t reach. I was then referred to an oncologist — a genial and optimistic doctor — for a surgical biopsy. I felt like I was living in someone else’s bad dream. It didn’t help that I had flashbacks about my mom and what she went through when she lost her three-year battle with breast cancer.

Fortunately, the results of the surgical biopsy turned out to be benign, but for about three weeks I worried and promised the powers that be that I would join Weight Watchers to get to a healthy weight and cut out sugar (not that I eat a lot of sugar), because cancer loves sugar. And certainly I’m glad I have health insurance, but the process was quite an ordeal, particularly when it came to dealing with the radiology department.

I saw three different radiologists. The first was a gruff man who, upon seeing me sitting in the chair, abruptly turned to the nurse and said, “she’s not supposed to be there.” He refused to come back into the room until I moved to the exam table. “That was rude,” I told the nurse. She shrugged.

The second radiologist treated me with a great deal more respect. She explained everything involved in the needle biopsy and it ended up not being the scary procedure I’d been dreading.

The third radiologist kept me waiting in my loose gown in a cold room for an hour, which made me late for my surgery. When she walked in, I was pleased to see a young Asian doctor, but that soon withered when she brusquely said, “I’m going to do some math, so I won’t be talking to you.” Later, when I asked her to explain the form she wanted me to sign, she replied curtly, “it’s a standard form.” Granted, though, she was behind schedule and the procedure she was performing was complicated.

I had a centimeter-long lesion, so the doctor

marked both ends of it with wire threads coming out of my breast, which was squashed between two mammogram plates for about 20 minutes. When I told the doctor and the nurse supervisor how much it hurt, they ignored me. A younger nurse at least brought me a tissue when I started crying. It was painful and humiliating, especially because I was dreading surgery.

The biopsy went well and I was thrilled to receive the “all clear.” Who knew “benign” could be such a beautiful word? A month later, though, on a trip to Ashland, the biopsy area became infected and turned my breast bright red. After taking antibiotics, it finally started to heal. I really hope I won’t need any other medical procedures soon.

Then there’s the pain of opening up the medical bills and finding out the outrageous charges. One bill was nearly \$3,000 just for the radiologist to do the needle biopsy. The surgical biopsy alone cost more than \$11,000. After my co-pays and deductibles, it will likely end up costing me about \$1,100 for everything.

While I’m glad to have the insurance, I still wonder why it has to cost so much. I also wonder how an immigrant or refugee family would be able to understand all the procedures I went through as well as the disrespectful treatment I received from people in the business of caring for other people. I wonder how a family on the margins living paycheck to paycheck could afford a \$1,100 bill and how much of a burden it would be on them.

Now that it’s October, it’s time for insurance “open enrollment” again. Luckily, with the Affordable Care Act, I receive a tax credit on health insurance, but I never know each year which insurance plan I should choose that is within my budget. I’ve started researching which policy might offer my husband and me the best coverage for an affordable premium. I ponder how people new to our country or less educated families are able to decipher the puzzle of choosing an insurance plan.

Mostly I wonder why taking care of one’s health has to be so difficult.

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