

THE COMMON GOOD

COVID-19 pandemic shows U.S. health care lacking

The COVID-19 Pandemic has revealed major defects in health care in the United States.

Racial disparities in access to health care are clear in the disproportionate deaths from COVID-19 among African Americans and other people of color.



BILL WHITAKER
THE COMMON GOOD

Tying health insurance to employment has failed. Nationally, more than 42.6 million Americans have lost their jobs. During the first seven weeks of the pandemic 382,000 Oregonians filed unemployment claims. In April, Union County's unemployment rate was 19.3%, the third highest in the state. In Wallowa County, 14.1% were unemployed. When health insurance is tied to employment, those who have health insurance (not everybody does) often lose it when they lose their jobs.

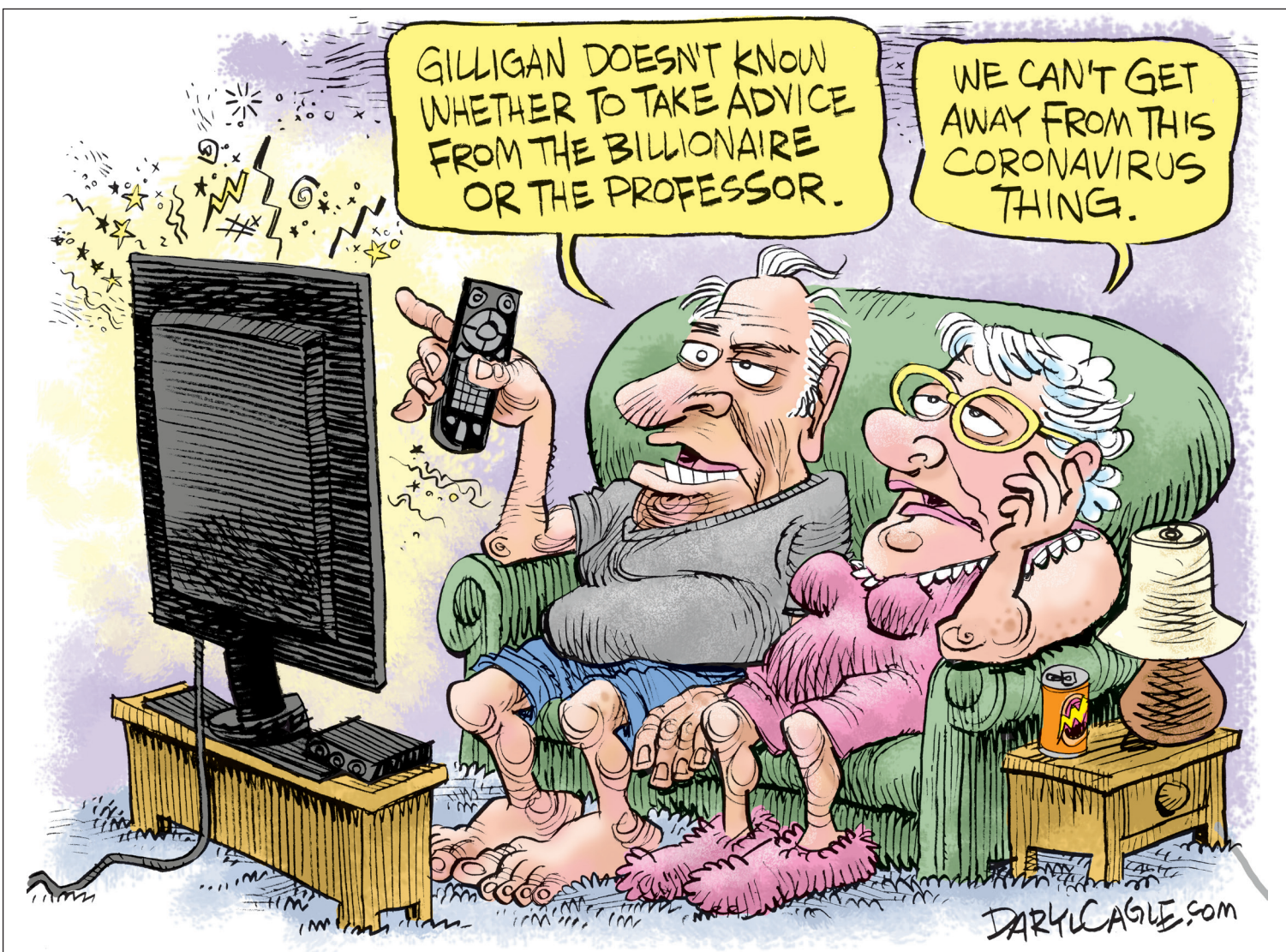
Health care needs to be seen as a human right, not an employee benefit. The unemployed have no less need to visit a doctor or a hospital than do those with jobs. They are no less likely to come down with COVID-19, heart disease or cancer. We need to uncouple health insurance from employment.

There are 44 million Americans who have no health insurance — are not covered by Medicare, Medicaid, the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), the Veterans Administration, Indian Health Services or other programs.

Another 38 million Americans have inadequate health insurance. Many of us who think we have insurance have such high deductibles and co-pays that we cannot afford to use our insurance. We are woefully underinsured.

Americans pay, by far, the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs. While the pharmaceutical industry makes tens of billions a year in profit and gives their CEOs exorbitant compensation packages, one out of five of us are unable to afford the medicine our doctors prescribe.

Prescription costs are likely to become even more absurd. The federal government is providing billions of our tax dollars to major drug com-



panies as they search for a COVID-19 vaccine. But there is no guarantee that the new vaccine will be provided free to the American people. We may end up paying for the vaccine twice, first through our taxes funding the research and second when we purchase the product. If you can afford the payment, you stay alive. If not, tough luck.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that we need a health care system that works for everyone, not just those of us who can afford expensive out-of-pocket co-pays and private insurance premiums.

There are two steps we need to take in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, as an interim measure, we need to pass the Health Care Emergency Guarantee Act (HCEGA) introduced by Sen. Bernie Sanders, New York-D, (with Oregon's U.S. Sen. Merkley-D, as a co-sponsor) and Rep. Pramila Jayapal, Washington-D. HCEGA leverages the existing efficiency of Medicare payments to ensure COVID-19 relief funding goes directly

to patient care, without changing families' insurance coverage or touching the Medicare trust fund.

Under HCEGA, the federal government would pay all of the costs of treatment for the uninsured and all of the out-of-pocket costs for those with public or private insurance, for as long as the pandemic continues. This will insure that nobody who is sick, regardless of income or immigration status, needs to be afraid to seek the medical care they need.

Second, when a new congress is elected and the COVID-19 pandemic has abated, we need to enact the Medicare For All Act. Across the nation significant majorities of Democrats, Republicans and Independents support the expanded health care coverage proposed by the Medicare For All Act.

Medicare for All will guarantee health care for every person in the United States regardless of employment status and eliminate exorbitant out-of-pocket deductibles, co-pays and prescription drug prices. Medicare for All will allow patients to choose phy-

sicians according to their actual health conditions. It will add dental, vision, hearing, and long-term care coverage, which are not included in traditional Medicare. Medicare for All preserves access to medical benefits and services through the Veterans Administration and the Indian Health Service.

We need health care that prioritizes patient care and public health over lining the pockets of big pharma and insurance CEOs. As our country responds to the global coronavirus pandemic and hundreds of thousands of Americans lose their jobs — and as a result, their health care — our elected officials must ensure that everyone has access to quality health care.

About the Author

Bill Whitaker lives in La Grande. He is professor emeritus of social welfare at Boise State University. He taught community organizing, social policy and planning for 40 years while serving on national social work education boards and state legislative task forces.

Your views

Miri Koltuv inspires hope for the future

I would like to express my admiration and respect for Miri Koltuv for organizing the Black Lives Matter protests in La Grande in recent days.

Miri, at 11, you have more courage and conviction than most adults I know. Exhausted by the complacency of adults like me, you've inspired me to be more outspoken with my own convictions.

Knowing that good people like you are in the world speaking out against injustice, I have hope for the future.

Christopher Rosevear
Union

Make the change — stand up for black lives

Why say "Black Lives Matter"? Don't all lives matter? It seems to me there is an unspoken assumption behind these questions that is based on faulty thinking. The assumption is that if I say Black Lives

Matter, there must be some other lives that don't matter to me. Singling out black lives for affirmation offends because it leaves others out. And if I'm not black, I feel excluded. I call this faulty thinking because one statement does not negate the other.

If I say Black Lives Matter, it is a statement that can stand alone with no underlying assumptions. It doesn't affirm or negate any other group. It's just a statement I wish to make. Do I believe all lives matter? Of course I do. It's another statement I could easily choose to make. I could even say that if all lives matter, then surely black lives are included in that.

There are times, however, within our society that it is imperative to affirm that, within the "all," Black Lives Matter. We are in the midst of one of those times.

There are people who denigrate black lives. Unarmed black men are killed at an alarming rate. The truth of that is starkly before us as never before because we all walk around with cameras in our hands so actions are being documented. The graphic images of the death of George Floyd are seared into our consciousness. We cannot

deny the truth that black lives are in danger. George Floyd Matters. Ahmaud Arbery Matters. Black Lives Matter.

The silence has been broken about what is happening to black lives in America. Let that reality never be forgotten. Don't be distracted by the few who have turned to violence in the streets. Keep focused on the real issue of danger to black lives. Don't let it persist to another generation. Stand up for black lives. Make the change. Remind our country over and over that Black Lives Matter!

Colleen Nelson, retired pastor
La Grande

Criminal justice reform is within our reach

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "A riot is the language of the unheard." As a civil servant, I see Dr. King's wisdom play out regularly, and I have learned to address anger by listening and collaborating to reform systems that my community believes to be unjust.

This week, hundreds of our neighbors took to the streets of La Grande to protest in favor of the criminal justice reforms that

should have prevented the deaths of George Floyd, Eric Garner, Philando Castille and thousands of our fellow Americans of color.

Oversight of police by an appointed city commission is a practical local solution to facilitating dialogue and reform when the community believes that trust is broken, but only 200 of 18,000 local law enforcement agencies in the U.S. have such a body.

As a candidate for mayor of La Grande, I support establishing a police commission similar to the city of Eugene's, inviting residents and law enforcement officers to promote a citizen-driven community policing model to prevent crime.

Police advisory commissions should be the norm, not the exception, and the hub of Northeast Oregon can set the standard for other communities in the region by providing a forum where residents and law enforcement collaborate to prevent crime and promote public safety. The time to fight for a better community is now, and this local victory is within easy reach if we the people join hands and demand action.

Alex McHaddad
La Grande

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