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INSIDE IT'S COUNTY FAIR TIME IN GO!

Counting the costs of care



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

CHI ST. ANTHONY HOSPITAL

Tonsil removal at CHI St. Anthony Hospital, Pendleton, costs between \$6,740 and \$7,295, according to Oregon Health Authority data.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

GOOD SHEPHERD MEDICAL CENTER

An MRI for the head and spine costs \$217 at Good Shepherd Medical Center, Hermiston, according to the All Payers, All Claims data.



Baker City Herald, File

SAINT ALPHONSUS MEDICAL CENTER

Hospitals in the Trinity Health system, such as Saint Alphonse Medical Center, Baker City, are working toward increasing price transparency across the board.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

GRANDE RONDE HOSPITAL

Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande, charges more for tonsil removal and less for an arthrocentesis compared to other area hospitals.

Patient variables, markets play key roles in health care prices

By ALEX WITTWER
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — The long-awaited hospital price transparency laws have taken effect on the national level, following a landmark bill by the Trump administration requiring hospitals to post their negotiated rates that insurers pay for typical procedures.

For Oregon, it's too little too late. In 2015, the Oregon Senate passed a law requiring hospitals to post the prices they paid for procedures to the All Payers, All Claims Reporting Program. Analysts at the Oregon Health Authority used the data to make reports about the prices of common procedures.

The prices were all over the map. Arthrocentesis — removal of fluid from a socket or joint — can range from \$370 to \$4,921 at Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston and costs between \$947 to \$1,091 at Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande.

Tonsil removal, another common procedure, costs between \$8,018 and \$10,281 at Grande Ronde, while an hour drive northwest to CHI St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton the procedure runs from \$6,740 to \$7,295.

Hospitals argue that each patient is different, and the care they receive is indicative of the unique challenges diagnosing and treating patients.

"You might go in thinking that it's a \$20,000 inpatient surgical procedure and then you might get a bill for \$40,000 because you have implantables, pharmacy, ultrasounds and the like," said David Bit-

ner, vice president and chief revenue officer at Trinity Health, which owns the St. Alphonse chain of hospitals in Eastern Oregon and Idaho.

But even procedures that offer little variation in execution can have dramatic variations in price.

An MRI for the head and spine costs \$217 at Good Shepherd in Hermiston, according to the All Payers, All Claims data. That same procedure would cost \$2,306 at Grande Ronde Hospital.

"There appears to be no rhyme or reason behind how hospitals price their procedures," said Jeremy Vandehey, director of Health Policy and Analytics at OHA. "A normal birth with no complications," Vandehey continued, "can vary a lot; so one hospital may charge \$5,000 while another charges \$15,000."

That remains true for several other procedures as well, and it's especially true in

Eastern Oregon, where Type A hospitals — hospitals that are more than 30 miles away from each other — are typically the only source of health care for rural residents.

"When you have several payers competing for one hospital, they become price takers," Vandehey said.

Market power

The intended effect of price transparency was to introduce healthy competition to a marketplace that had long been shrouded in secrecy. But Rajiv Sharma, a health economics professor at Portland State University, said market power plays a big role in pricing.

"If insurance companies are faced with one or two big hospital chains, then they don't have very much negotiating power,"

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Fair returns 'bigger and better'

By CARLOS FUENTES and
DAVIS CARBAUGH

The Observer

LA GRANDE — County fairs can't be planned overnight. They take months of work, from coordinating vendor sites to buying advertising to booking entertainment close to a year in advance.

Usually, fair managers are responsible for delegating all of these responsibilities and overseeing planning throughout the whole process. But this year's

Union County Fair manager? Her first day on the job was Monday, July 26, nine days before the start of the fair. Kathy Gover-Shaw was hired in June 2021 and has taken the helm of the community event.

"I did 4-H decades ago and I've always wanted to give back," Gover-Shaw said. "This just came up and some friends on the board told me it would be a really good fit."

After a year-long hiatus, the Union County Fair is back from Aug. 4-7, with

several changes in the schedule and the leadership since the last county fair in 2019.

Learning on the fly

With such little time to learn her new position, Gover-Shaw has relied heavily on the Union County Fair board members. The seven-person team plans the event months ahead of time, working with community partners like FFA, 4-H and the Lion's Club to coordinate the county fair.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Terry and Julie Magill prepare their lemonade stand at the Union County Fairgrounds on Tuesday, Aug. 3, 2021.

"It's a huge group of people that work together," Gover-Shaw said. "It's a community down here that makes this happen."

Gover-Shaw took over for former fair manager Margaret Spence, who held

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CONTACT US

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Email story ideas to news@lagrandeobserver.com.
More contact info on Page 4A.



SATURDAY

TRYING TO TEMPT WALLOWA RIVER REDSIDES

Online at lagrandeobserver.com