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TRANS TRIBULATIONS

Oregon Health Plan won't pay for gender reassignment surgery; Legislature may make its own gesture to seal the deal by Inga Sorensen

"I'm not surprised," says Margaret Deirdre O'Hartigan, acting director of the Filisa Vistima Foundation, a Portland-based group that advocates for transsexual rights.

O'Hartigan's response was prompted by a state commission's unanimous decision on Feb. 25 to exclude gender reassignment surgery from the Oregon Health Plan, which provides health-care coverage to tens of thousands of low-income residents.

For the past two years, transsexuals have called upon the Oregon Health Services Commission to include gender reassignment surgery on the list of treatments covered by the Oregon Health Plan.

Last year, the commission launched a task force to explore the issue. Its chairman, Dr. Eric Walsh, who also sits on the commission, said the task force examined more than two dozen studies on the effectiveness of gender reassignment surgery and concluded there was no solid evi-

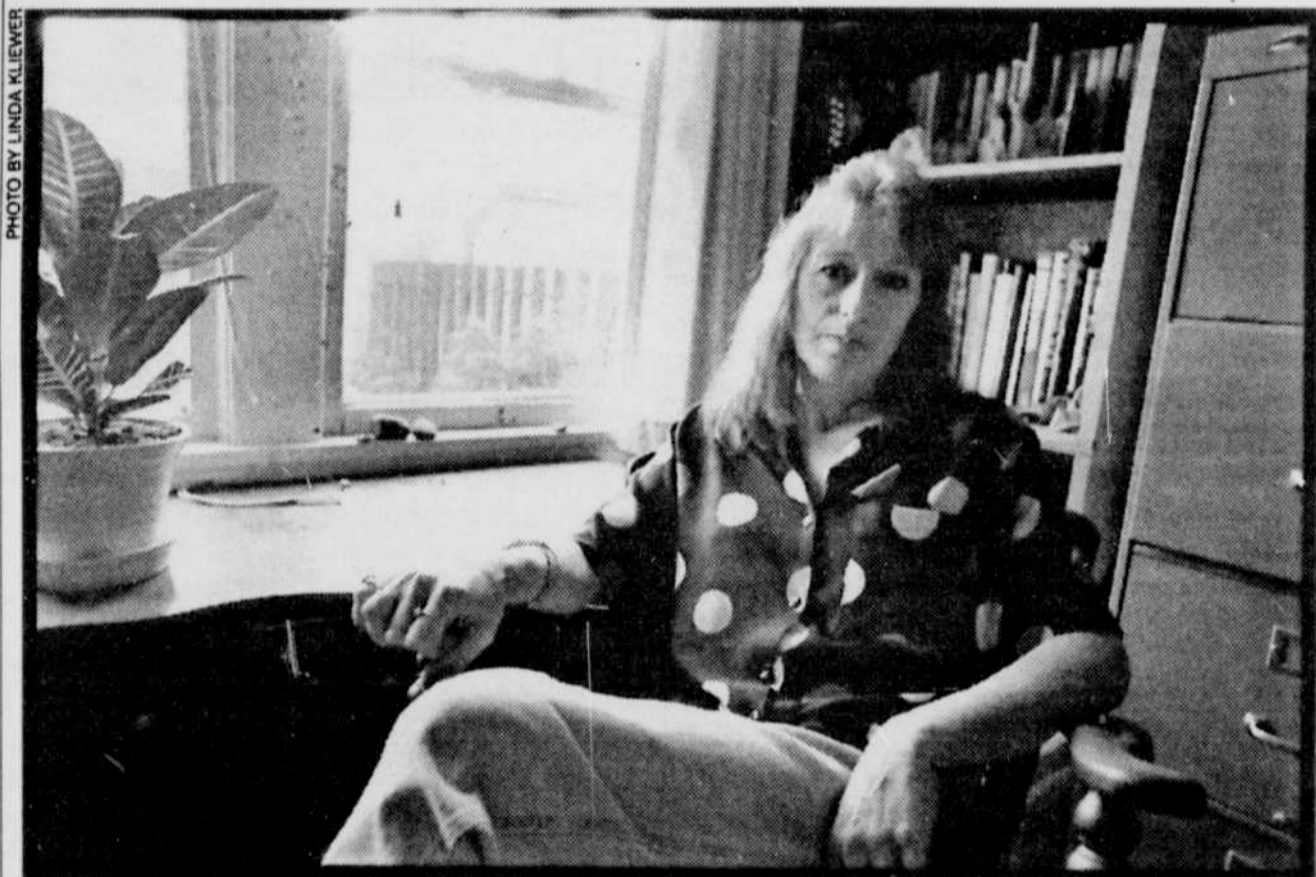
been battling with the state for months to have her labioplasty surgery covered by public funds. The state has repeatedly rejected Jaquay's request—a move that she and others have called a violation of civil rights law.

"They clearly prioritize on the basis of their personal prejudice," Jaquay told the AP. "The task force is completely biased and made up of people who don't deal with the transsexual population."

To add insult to injury, state lawmakers may hold a hearing in late March on House Bill 2076, promoted by Rep. Ron Sunseri, a Gresham Republican, that would block gender reassignment surgery from the list of health services covered under the Oregon Health Plan.

The bill has been assigned to the Human Resources Committee, and its chair, GOP Rep. Jeff Kruse of Roseburg, has signaled he will hold a hearing.

In the Feb. 26 issue of *The Oregonian*, he said: "We still need to hear the bill because this is the



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—Olivia Jaquay

dence that the surgery led to a better quality of life for transsexuals, reduced bouts of depression, or prevented them from attempting suicide.

Walsh told *The Associated Press*: "There's no evidence this surgery saves lives. There's no pressing need to put it on the list" of procedures covered by the state.

According to the AP, "Walsh said the operations are of some help dealing with people's 'body image problems,' but they don't necessarily improve a person's 'social functioning,' such as ability to hold a job."

O'Hartigan, meanwhile, says the commission looked at "good studies" but simply ignored some of the available research, including findings she says indicate that gender reassignment surgery has a more positive and successful impact if the change occurs earlier in life, rather than later.

She was among those who boycotted the Feb. 25 meeting, labeling the process a "sham."

Olivia Jaquay agrees. She is dependent on the Oregon Health Plan for health care and has

third time [the commission has] considered the issue. We need to tell the commission they need to stick to real medicine."

O'Hartigan says the push to move the bill despite the commission's decision to exclude gender reassignment surgery highlights the widespread bigotry against transsexuals. She likens the action to the proverbial nail in the coffin, stake through the heart.

"Why else would they need to do this?" she questions, adding that if there is a hearing, you can bet she'll be there.

■ Board members of *The Filisa Vistima Foundation*, along with transsexual activist Olivia Jaquay, will give a presentation entitled *DIAGNOSIS DISCRIMINATION: THE OREGON HEALTH PLAN AND THE POOR*, during the 18th annual *Lewis and Clark College Gender Studies Symposium* in Portland. The presentation will be held from 10:30 a.m. to noon on March 12. For more information, call *The Filisa Vistima Foundation* at 735-1184.

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