

Health Delivery Reform

Can we pull it off?

In June of this year, the Oregon Legislature passed the Healthy Oregon Act creating the Oregon Health Fund Board. This board will design a plan for universal access to health services, and present its recommendations to the governor and the Legislature on Oct 1, 2008. The Legislature will act on the recommendations in 2009.

Many people are unaware of this important development. On Oct. 24 and 25 there are two meetings in Eugene about what is happening now in health delivery reform. Information about the meetings is at the end of this article.

What will this new law do for us?

Most importantly, the state of Oregon assumes responsibility for creating a health system that all of us can use all the time.

The law lays out a multi-tiered system for all which expands and strengthens Medicaid and SCHIP, creates a publicly run system of "accountable health plans" aimed primarily at the currently uninsured, but open to all. These accountable health plans are required to take all applicants, and to charge the same premium for all enrollees regardless of health status. Subsidized private insurance for some low income Oregonians and for those with pre-existing conditions will continue along with "safety net" clinics for some.

Private health insurance plans will continue as an option, competing with the public plans and with each other. The state may not force individuals with adequate private insurance to join a public plan. The Health Fund Board must create a suitable business environment so the public and the private parts of this system do not compete destructively. Neither Medicare nor the Medicaid long-term care system are changed by the law.

There will be an "individual mandate": All eligible Oregonians must have suitable access to the health delivery system, through either the public or private plans. For most, this will not be free care. Both individuals and employers will be involved, supporting the private segment, or the public segment, or possibly both.

The Oregon Health Fund Board website (oregon.gov/DAS/OHPPR/HFB) has information on meeting schedules, agendas, minutes, and public presentations. During the next year the board will design the Accountable Health Plans and the Safety Net, and consider questions of benefits, eligibility, delivery and funding.

What are some things to think about?

The overwhelming majority of us are ready for big changes toward more fairness, efficiency, and accountability. (See the reports of the Citizens' Health Care Working Group in the "appendices" for public surveys. citizenshealthcare.gov.)

The "conventional wisdom" is that we are not ready for a single-payer (Canadian) system. Other countries with more than one administrative system (Germany) seem to do OK. What features of these systems that we should incorporate into our own?

Individual choice is a consideration. Which choices are essential? We'd like to be able to choose our own doctors, treatments and to seek other opinions. What choices should be reserved for each individual to make?

We patients need to be "more responsible." What will citizens be responsible for? Will we have to do more than sign up and contribute financially? Will we be required to see the doctor regularly? Will we have to adopt healthful habits? What will be asked of doctors, hospitals, government, drug companies and insurers?

Why a community meeting? The non-profit consumer organization Oregon Health Action Campaign (OHAC) is dedicated to informing Oregonians about proposals for universal and expanded access developed by the 2007 Legislature.

We want meeting participants to come away understanding that there is a role for them and their communities in defining next steps: That implementation of Healthy Kids depends on a yes vote in November and that the Healthy Oregon Act offers many opportunities for public engagement and public hearings.

The October meeting for Health Care for All Oregon and We Can Do Better was held Oct. 24. Join us for a very special second community meeting from 6:30 to 8:30 pm Oct. 25 at the Eugene Public Library Bascom Room for "Finding the Road to Health Care for All 2007 and the Oregon Legislature." Presented by OHAC in association with We Can Do Better/Archimedes and Health Care For All Oregon. Refreshments and free parking. For more information call (800) 789-1599 ext. 16 or email Sandra@ohac.org

Frank N. Turner, MD, is a specialist in pulmonary medicine who now works exclusively with the Volunteers of medicine Clinic. He's active in several health care reform groups.



BOB AND THE BIRD

There's not much I can add to Chuck Gerard's positive profile (10/4) of retired White Bird Clinic Coordinator Bob Dritz. He's a Eugene icon deserving of all the recognition and accolades tossed his way. White Bird can do more with a service dollar than any agency in town, bar none, and there are a lot of excellent social service agencies in Eugene and Springfield.

Other people with positions like Bob's had titles like director, or executive director, or program manager, but at White Bird the guy in charge had the simple and benign title of coordinator.

I worked for many years at Lane County Mental Health, serving some of the same folks White Bird does. More than once I found myself in conflict with colleagues when we discussed how scarce service dollars should be allocated. Mental Health had a say in how much money White Bird got each year to carry out its 24-hour crisis response system — especially between 5 pm and 8 am when Mental Health was closed. In lean years (well, they're all lean years, but some are leaner than others), cutting the contract to White Bird was always on the table. But, under Bob's guidance, The Bird always survived, thankfully.

Many of the folks White Bird works with are those who want nothing to do with the government, which means avoiding Lane County programs, even though we might have had the help they needed. White Bird is often the best alternative and, given what it can do with a dollar, probably serves two or three people for every one served by other agencies.

There will always be a role for a White Bird in any community. Public mental health programs like that operated by Lane County — and companion programs like White Bird — are the dumping ground for people rejected by other agencies because they don't meet strict eligibility criteria. When other agencies called me looking for services for someone, I was supposed to ask, "What's the diagnosis?" Once, when I asked a White Bird worker that question, the answer was, "Twenty years of hard living." I couldn't find that diagnostic label in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, published by the American Psychiatric Association — and I don't recall if I was able to help that particular individual. But I'm quite certain that, in a clinic coordinated by Bob Dritz, the man got the help he needed even if he didn't get it from the government.

Gary Cornelius
Eugene

FIXING THE ERRORS

Voting Yes on Measure 49 is one of the most important decisions we can make for our children's future. We can continue exploiting the present at the expense of the future, but it's time we decide to stop. It's time we decide to give. Measure 49 will help us do that. It will slow the paving over of farmland, the misuse of water rights and the cutting of forestland that Measure 37 guarantees. It will fix the worst errors that Measure 37 allows.

Measure 49 will stop us from turning ourselves into the land-use nightmares that cities like Los Angeles and Phoenix have become. It will stop subdivisions, big-box stores, strip malls and elite resorts in remote or environmentally unsound areas. When cheap oil inevitably turns into expensive oil, what will our children do with our bad land-use decisions? When farmland is paved over, where will they go to grow food? So vote to give to your children, so they may enjoy, and may also preserve, the rich environment that we have. Vote Yes on Measure 49.

Debra Higbee
Eugene

UTTER CYNICISM

I, too, heard Sherry Turkle's UO talk ("Robot Companions," news story, 10/18) about technology's negative effects on all of us. She mainly discussed the sad, unhealthy landscape which envelops society, and which is now much worse than she expected 20 years ago. The erosion of face-to-face relationships and direct experience, the transfer of emotional ties to the proliferating machines that take us further from the earth with each passing day.

But I was even more strongly struck by the utter cynicism — to me — that was her fundamental message. She spoke of "putting technology in its place," but ended by saying that all this deepening anti-humanness is "the price we have to pay." She has embraced every new step of the technoculture, and made it plain that she will never not accept its supposed inevitability.

One doesn't become a famous part of the cyber-elite any other way. I find this an abhorrent cop-out.

John Zerzan
Eugene

COST OF PARKS

A letter from Loren M. Mohler Oct. 11 seems a tad confused. It asks the reader to consider how a \$40 million public park across from the library would revitalize "me and my experience of downtown"? That number is completely misleading; the cost of a park would be just a fraction of that amount. Preliminary research on a quarter-block park with interactive fountain produced estimates of \$200,000 or less for grading and landscaping. A fountain the size of the Salmon Springs fountain on the Portland waterfront (60 feet in diameter) cost just \$1 million. A somewhat smaller fountain, 40 to 50 feet in diameter, would cost about \$750,000. So, a quarter-block park, with fountain, could be built for about \$1 million total, not including purchase of the land, and a half-block park could be built for about \$1.5 million. Let's get our facts right.

Thomas Lincoln
Lincoln Design
Springfield