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# Cover Me

Could Oregon have health care for all? BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

**W**hen it comes to your health, contagion could be a good thing. Not the sort of contagion where the guy sitting next to you explosively sneezes and you just know that the next person to begin blowing her nose and being miserable is you. Think of the sort of contagion where a state such as Vermont does something good, like ensuring that all its citizens have health insurance, and the idea spreads across the country like the bird flu, only better.

Health care advocates in Eugene would love to see single-payer health insurance spread to Oregon. More than 45,000 people a year die nationwide because they can't afford health insurance, according to a 2009 study out of Harvard Medical School. "I find that an abomination," says Charlotte Maloney of Health Care for All Oregon.

When Oregonians think of Vermont, maple syrup or Ben and Jerry's come to mind. But it's also known for being first with crazy ideas that spread across the country, like public education and banning slavery. Groups such as Health Care for All Oregon and Jobs with Justice are hoping the idea of single-payer health insurance will spread in the same way. Vermont passed a bill in June that will bring health insurance to everyone in that state. Could that happen in Oregon? On Dec. 15, the folks that helped bring universal health care to Vermont are coming to Eugene to explain how they did it.

## SINGLE PAYER

Single payer is an odd phrase that makes health insurance sound very boring. Health insurance is not boring; it's a matter of life and death.

On Aug. 30, a 24-year-old Ohio man named Kyle Willis died of a toothache because he didn't have health insurance. Willis, the nephew of funk bass player Bootsy Collins and the father of a 6-year-old daughter, went to the dentist with a toothache. Unemployed and without insurance, he couldn't afford to have his infected wisdom tooth removed. When the pain worsened and his face began to swell, he went to the emergency room where he was given a prescription for antibiotics and one for painkillers. Unable to pay for both medications, Willis took the painkillers. The infection from his tooth spread to his brain and Willis died.

Think that couldn't happen to anyone you know? Think again. A 2011 statewide survey by the Oregon Health Authority estimates that 560,000 Oregonians are uninsured. The survey says, "Approximately one in five Oregonians of working age (19-64) lack health insurance, revealing a sizeable number of Oregonians who do not have adequate access to affordable health insurance."

So what is single payer? Single payer is simply a way to ensure that those without insurance can get it, says Ruth Duemler of Healthcare for All Oregon. "It is public