

Hepatitis C drug costs challenge corrections budget

By HILLARY BORRUD
Capital Bureau



Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla. The Department of Corrections faces the challenge of paying for expensive new treatments for hepatitis C. t

Oregon faces budget-busting costs for expensive new treatments for hepatitis C, and the issue is not limited to the state's Medicaid program.

The prison system also faces higher costs from a new drug that cures many people of the potentially deadly disease, but costs the Department of Corrections roughly \$70,000 per inmate for the 12-week treatment. The Legislature already approved an additional \$3.2 million in a supplemental budget bill earlier this year to cover the drug Harvoni for inmates, after the number of inmates treated rose sharply in December. The increase was also part of the reason the Legislature boosted the Department of Corrections' latest two-year budget for medical supplies by nearly 32 percent.

At the same time, it remains difficult for low-income people insured under the state's Medicaid program, the Oregon Health Plan, to get approved for the newer hepatitis C drugs unless they have reached the more advanced stages of the disease.

Hepatitis C can eventually cause liver failure and cancer. The death rate from hepatitis C in Oregon has been higher than for HIV for more than a decade, and an average of 441 people died from the virus each year from 2009 to 2013, according to an epidemio-

logical report released by the Oregon Health Authority this year. A majority were men and people aged 45 to 64, and blacks and Native Americans were roughly twice as likely to die from the virus.

Higher rate among inmates

There is a higher prevalence of hepatitis C among current and former inmates, and in Oregon researchers think that 30 percent of people in state prisons might have chronic hepatitis C infections,

according to the report. Although many people were infected through pre-1992 blood transfusions, researchers identified injection drug use as the most common route of transmission for new hepatitis C infections in Oregon. Nationally, young injection drug users who get the virus are white, live in rural areas and initially got hooked on prescription opiates.

Wendy Smith, professional services administrator at the Department of Corrections, said the agency does

not have a specific budget for Harvoni in the current two-year budget. However, the agency spends approximately \$1.2 million per month on its pharmacy, Smith wrote in an email.

A budget report by the Legislative Fiscal Office earlier this year said the average number of inmates receiving Harvoni rose from nine to 35 per month, which based on the cost provided by the agency would translate to a monthly cost of approximately \$816,000 for Harvoni alone.

The treatment usually takes 12 weeks to complete.

'A significant cost driver'

In a statement, Steve Robbins, the agency's chief financial officer, said medical treatment "continues to be a significant cost driver" for the department. However, Robbins added, "The agency is constitutionally mandated to provide medically necessary care to a community standard, without regard to treatment cost. The use of Harvoni has

become community standard as recommended by the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases (AASLD) and Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA)." The Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibits cruel and unusual punishment.

The agency's last two-year medical supply budget, which is mostly medication, started at \$25.9 million and was ultimately increased to \$30.4 million, in part because of the hepatitis C drug costs, Robbins wrote. The current two-year medical supply budget is \$34.2 million. Robbins wrote that more inmates are also choosing the treatment because it does not have some of the side effects of earlier treatments.

Without discounts, Harvoni can cost as much as \$94,500 for a 12-week treatment, according to published news reports. Although the Department of Corrections is part of a large pharmaceutical buying consortium, it still appears to be paying more than the price at which drug manufacturer Gilead Sciences reportedly offered to sell the drug to Medicaid patients in Oregon.

A year ago, The Oregonian reported Gilead representatives said they offered the drug to Oregon at a price close to what Canada paid, \$55,000 for the 12-week treatment.

The Capital Bureau is a collaboration between EO Media Group and Pamplin Media Group.

Gearhart drug dealer sentenced to probation

By KYLE SPURR
The Daily Astorian

A Gearhart drug dealer was sentenced to three years probation last week after admitting to selling methamphetamine near Gearhart Elementary School.

Leonard Shane Hitchman will face 80 months, or nearly seven years, in prison, if he violates the probation.

Hitchman, 45, appeared in Clatsop County Circuit Court Friday to change his plea,

which canceled a trial scheduled for today. He pleaded no contest to unlawful possession of methamphetamine and unlawful delivery of methamphetamine within 1,000 feet of a school.

The meth possession charge was elevated to a commercial drug offense since Hitchman possessed more than \$300, drug records and packaging materials.

Clatsop County Sheriff's Office arrested Hitchman in

February after a Clatsop County Drug Task Force investigation.

Drug task force detectives received numerous complaints over several months regarding ongoing illegal drug activity at 166 Ridge Drive in Gearhart, according to the sheriff's office.

Detectives were granted search warrants for Hitchman's residence and his vehicle.

During the search, detectives discovered metham-

phetamine, drug trafficking records, needles, scales and packaging materials commonly used by illegal drug traffickers.

In addition, detectives found more than \$1,500 in cash and a weapon.

The charges against Hitchman occurred in December and in February.

"When they served the search warrant, he had a lot of money in his safe at this home," Prosecutor Dawn Buz-

zard said. "He had little baggies of drugs and he sold them to an undercover informant."

Hitchman's defense was that he won most of the cash in a lottery, and that he was just giving a ride to a woman who he was selling meth to.

Buzard said she was especially concerned since this activity was happening close to the elementary school.

"Kids go play in the playground right there. It should be a safe place," she said.



Leonard Shane Hitchman

South coast of Washington reopens to recreational crabbing

EO Media Group

OLYMPIA — The recreational Dungeness crab fishery along the southern Washington coast will reopen effective immediately, state shellfish managers announced Friday.

With this action, the entire Washington coast is open for sport crabbing after elevated levels of domoic acid forced the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to close the crab fisheries this summer.

The state opened the northern coast in late August, when toxin levels there dropped to safe levels. Marine toxin

levels have continued to decline on the southern coast over the last month, said Dan Ayres, WDFW coastal shellfish manager. Recent tests by the Washington Department of Health show crabs on the southern coast — from Point Chehalis south to the Columbia River — are also safe to eat.

Domoic acid, a natural toxin produced by certain types of marine algae, can be harmful or even fatal if consumed in sufficient quantities. Cooking or freezing does not destroy domoic acid in shellfish.

As usual, the use of crab pots is prohibited on the coast

through Nov. 30, except in the Columbia River estuary, where pots are allowed year-round, Ayres said. Elsewhere along the coast, crabbers can use other gear, such as ring nets.

The Department of Health will continue to test shellfish in all coastal marine waters. Harvesters should check for closures on DOH's shellfish safety webpage at <https://fortress.wa.gov/doh/eh/maps/biotoxin/biotoxin.html>.

More information about domoic acid can be found on WDFW's webpage at http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/razorelams/domoic_acid.html.

Westport nursing assistant surrenders certificate

The Daily Astorian

Susan Ann Blazor, of Westport, voluntarily surrendered her nursing assistant certificate for failing to follow a care plan, which resulted in an injury of a resident.

The Oregon State Board of Nursing accepted Blazor's voluntary request earlier this month.

Blazor was issued her

nursing assistant certificate by the state board in June 2014.

In May, the board received information that Blazor was neglectful and failed to follow a care plan developed by a registered nurse, resulting in the injury of a resident. The board did not release where the incident took place.

The board had the right to revoke or suspend Blazor's

license since her conduct by the state board in June 2014. She cooperated with the board and voluntarily surrendered her certificate.

If, after a minimum of three years, Blazor wishes to reinstate her certificate, she can submit an application to the board to request reinstatement.

Clatsop Community College

changed

this Astoria man's life

In the Great Recession, Chris Gustafson was out of work. He enrolled in Clatsop's six-year-old program in Historic Restoration and Preservation. Today he operates his own window restoration business.

Clatsop Community College is an affirmative action, equal opportunity institution. ADA accessible.

For more information visit www.clatsopcc.edu

Visit us online at

www.DailyAstorian.com

Facebook Twitter Pinterest YouTube

WANTED

Alder and Maple Saw Logs & Standing Timber

Northwest Hardwoods • Longview, WA

Contact: Steve Axtell • 360-430-0885 or John Anderson • 360-269-2500

Guess what day it is!

It's Hump's Day!!!

AT HUMP'S RESTAURANT
EVERY WEDNESDAY 5-8 PM

14 OUNCE NEW YORK STEAK & BAKED POTATO **\$9.95** Must present coupon to server. Not valid with other offers.

All You Can Eat Chicken & Dumplings- Thursdays 5-8 pm \$6.95

Prime Rib Fridays- starts at 5pm \$9.95

Just 15 min. from the Lewis & Clark Bridge on Hwy. 30
Hump's Restaurant- 50 W. Columbia River Highway
Clatskanie, OR. 503.728.2626

NOW OPEN Friday & Saturday 6am-10pm