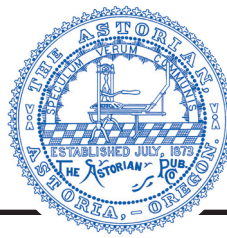


# OPINION



# the Astorian

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## GUEST COLUMN

# Bill could harm air ambulance service

In Clatsop County, we are home to beautiful landscapes like beaches, state forests and mountains. We're also home to one of the world's deadliest bars — the Graveyard of the Pacific — the Columbia River Bar.

Unfortunately, we're over 100 miles away from the nearest high-level trauma center. This leaves us in a challenging situation. When someone is



**TOM BERGIN**

in need of a high-level trauma center, we rely on air ambulances to provide lifesaving care and fast.

Even as sheriff, I can't call an air ambulance to the scene of an incident. That call needs to be made by a medical professional. The

decision to utilize an air ambulance is a serious one. It is not a resource we want to waste. Along with lifesaving care, air ambulances come with a hefty cost — they are expensive to operate.

Unfortunately, patients often get hit with the bill, a "surprise bill." According to a 2019 YouGov poll, 87% of people (93% of people that live in rural areas) feel that health insurance companies should cover services like air ambulances instead of pushing back on decisions from the medical professionals who decided the service was medically necessary.

Still, over half of all air ambulance claims are originally denied by insurers. That same poll said that nearly 60% of people expect that any remaining or "balanced" bills should be the responsibility of the insurer, not the patient or the provider. After all, what is the point of having health insurance if it doesn't cover your health care?

Right now, there is proposed legislation in Washington, D.C., that I think intends to address the issue of "surprise billing" but doesn't really get it. The



A bill in Congress could impact air ambulance service.

The Astorian

Lower Health Care Costs Act, while well-intentioned, misses the real issue responsible for the surprise billing of air ambulances. Instead of encouraging the coverage of these emergency services, the bill makes it easier for insurers to keep air ambulances out of their networks and deny claims while the cost of health care continues to rise.

Luckily, there is a better way.

Some states have implemented policies that allow insurers and providers to negotiate a cost that works for

them while guaranteeing patients aren't billed for unforeseen, emergency services. This approach incentivizes in-network agreements and makes sure that patients can focus on recovery instead of worrying about paying medical bills they were never expecting.

This issue is so important to me because air ambulances are especially vital to rural communities, like ours. Nearly 90% of patients transported by air medical services live in a rural zip code. If the Lower Health Care

Costs Act is passed, it will eventually force air ambulance bases all over the country to close. This would be leaving the 85 million Americans in rural areas that rely on air medical transport to access a Level I or Level II trauma center within 60 minutes in a dire situation.

I hope U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden understands the issue and votes against this potentially harmful bill.

*Tom Bergin is the Clatsop County sheriff.*

## GUEST COLUMN

# A moral perspective on pollution

Honolulu's Moana Surfrider Hotel on Waikiki Beach made a picture-perfect setting for Jacques Cousteau's speech in 1980. At an outdoor American Bar Association luncheon near the historic century-old banyan tree, Cousteau talked passionately about pollution of the oceans. With the deep blue Pacific as a background, he explained how land-based industrial pollution around the world affects life under the seas.

No one on that occasion 40 years ago could have foreseen that by 2019 America would be closer than



**DON HASKELL**

it has ever been to resolving our industrial pollution problems with a balance between economic and ecological concerns acceptable to most folks. Or that vast amounts of plastic waste would threaten ocean life everywhere. Or that huge amounts of pollution would be generated by "undeveloped" countries around the world — like China, for example, was undeveloped in 1980.

Cousteau was a world-famous television personality with a delightful French accent. He died in 1997 at the age of 87. People remember his illustrious career as a renowned ocean explorer, developer of the Aqua-Lung and filmmaker. By 1980, Cousteau had gained worldwide respect for his views about pollution's impact on life under the seas. And his warnings 40 years ago about the ocean environment strike home today, especially to our fishing industry and to fishermen everywhere.

Cousteau explained that all pollutants on land, air, or in the rivers eventually find their way into the oceans of the world. There can be no doubt life under the sea is adversely affected by pollutants of all land-based industries and waste systems. And Cousteau believed environmental safeguards can be economically sound as well as protective of the environment.

Cousteau referred to United Nations reports that predicted by the year 2000 the world's population would increase from 4.5 billion in 1980 to 6.3 billion. To Cousteau, that 50% increase meant even more pollution. By the year 2000, the world's population did increase to an estimated 6.1 billion. And the world experienced more pollution. But only 10 years later, world population had grown to 6.8 billion. And today it's projected to be almost 7.8 billion by the year 2020. And close to 10 billion by 2050. Increased world population



Surfrider Foundation

Plastic pollution is a growing problem worldwide.

## CHINA'S POLLUTION IN ITS CITIES KILLS AN ESTIMATED 1.1 MILLION CHINESE EVERY YEAR.

of this magnitude inevitably means a lot more pollution down the road than most folks realize.

During his career, Cousteau experienced thousands of dives in all the world's oceans, and saw firsthand the damage to undersea life. He described himself as a "man-fish," using the Aqua-Lung he developed. Because of land-based pollution, the world will lose up to an estimated 1,000 different species of undersea life. And nature takes millions of years to bring back ocean vitality. And to replace fish species and coral reefs damaged or destroyed by pollutants and human misuse.

Reports issued by United States environmental agencies about American industrial pollution troubled Cousteau. The agencies forecast environmental catastrophes around the country by the year 2000 if Congress didn't take remedial action.

Congress and presidents of both parties, however, did take action. And today we have the Clean Water Act, Safe Drink-

ing Water Act, Clean Air Act, Toxic Substances Control Act, along with many other legislative efforts to combat pollution of all kinds. And since 1980, the adoption of thousands of federal regulations also helped to substantially decrease industrial pollution in America.

But since 1980, many other countries vastly increased pollution. They were helped by Washington, D.C., politicians of both parties who adopted tax and trade policies to enable China and other undeveloped countries to build wealth and industrial might with American know-how and technology. And American politicians turned a blind eye to a huge increase in world pollution those policies inevitably generated.

Today, the most polluted cities in the world are in China, closely followed by cities in Mongolia, India and Pakistan. China's cities and other far eastern cities make up most of a 2018 listing of 500 of the most polluted cities in the world. And

the list doesn't include a single American city!

China's pollution in its cities kills an estimated 1.1 million Chinese every year. It's true China is beginning to spend money on wind and solar power. But China is the world's biggest polluter and isn't doing anywhere near enough to guard against the pollutants that seriously damage so much life under the seas.

It seems to me too many American politicians in the past didn't fully appreciate that China's dictatorship form of government is much different than ours. America has frequent elections that determine public policy. China's priorities about a cleaner environment are made by its leaders' insatiable personal lust for industrial and world power.

Cousteau emphasized the need for a global view to industrial pollution. He even suggested several principles that all world governments should adhere to. For example, safer ocean transportation and equal use of all oceans.

But it seems to me we're nowhere near close to worldwide remedies to ocean pollution as envisioned by Cousteau 40 years ago. And we won't be close for many generations to come. For two very simple reasons. Half the world's governments are dictatorships that have different priorities than democracies. And dictatorships don't have the same moral conscience about the environment that America and most democracies have.

Cousteau wondered aloud why mankind is unable to properly manage use of the environment. And why mankind has so much difficulty in finding remedies to pollution problems. His response stirred the crowd: "We need a moral perspective to the problem." He explained how his love of the sea and his ability to use the Aqua-Lung and explore the ocean depths allowed him to discover many unknown facts about undersea life, including the extent it was being damaged. And it was time at his stage of life to assess the damage and to answer questions raised by his conscience.

Forty years ago, Cousteau had a vision for the future of the world's oceans free of pollutants. But that vision appears to be shared only by America and most democracies in today's world. And that's a crying shame.

*Don Haskell is a retired attorney and former Clatsop County commissioner who lives in Astoria. He arranged for Jacques Cousteau's appearance in Honolulu in 1980.*