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OUR VIEW

Rural white women face declining lifespans

Middle-aged white women in places like Eastern Oregon are dying long before they should — a reversal in decades of improving life expectancy in the U.S.

Delving into government and academic data, *The Washington Post* this Sunday published a deeply troubling look at how addictions, depression and other factors cut decades from the lifespans of women, especially in America's countryside and small towns.

"From 1990 through 2014, the mortality rate for white women rose in most parts of the country, particularly around small cities and in rural areas. Rates often went up by more than 40 percent and, in some places, doubled," the *Post* reported.

Much of Eastern Oregon is in the worst quartile of excess death rates — above 40 percent. Umatilla and Morrow counties are comparatively much better off, with premature mortality of up to 12.5 percent. But east of the Cascades, only Deschutes County has seen declining death rates in the past two decades.

According to the *Post*, for every 100,000 women in their late 40s living in U.S. rural areas, 228 died in the year 2000. "Today, 296 are dying," the *Post* reports. "And in rural areas, the uptick in mortality was noticeable even earlier, as far back as 1990. Since then, death rates for rural white women in midlife have risen by nearly 50 percent."

This "corrosion of American health" is driven by several factors, chief among these being rising rates of opioid and heroin addiction, alcoholism and related diseases like cirrhosis of the liver, suicide, smoking and obesity. The suicide rate has more than doubled for rural white women ages 50 to 54, for example.

These deaths of all varieties are an end result of unique downward spirals of illness, often tied to poverty and absence of much to feel optimistic about. "There are millions of people underneath these (death statistics) who are in pain," one expert said.

Separate research published Monday in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* finds a stronger-than-ever connection between low incomes and unhealthy lifestyle choices when it comes to living longer. This research discovered that local attitudes and policy choices can have a substantial positive impact.

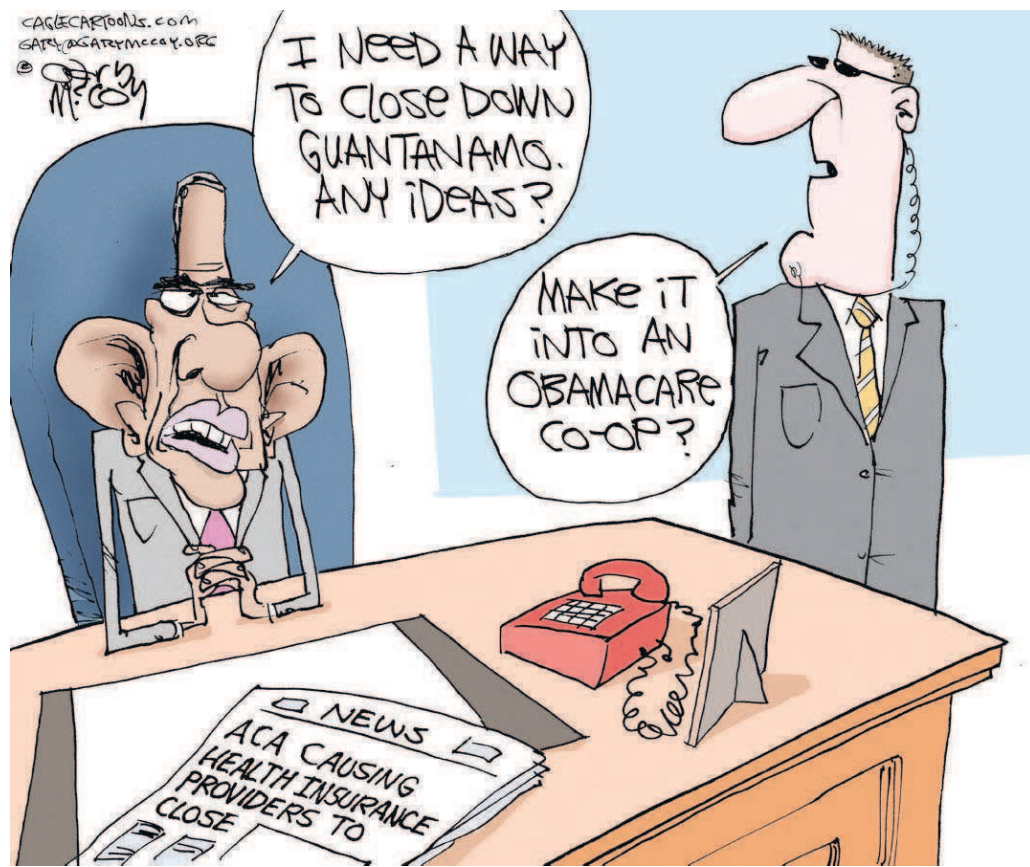
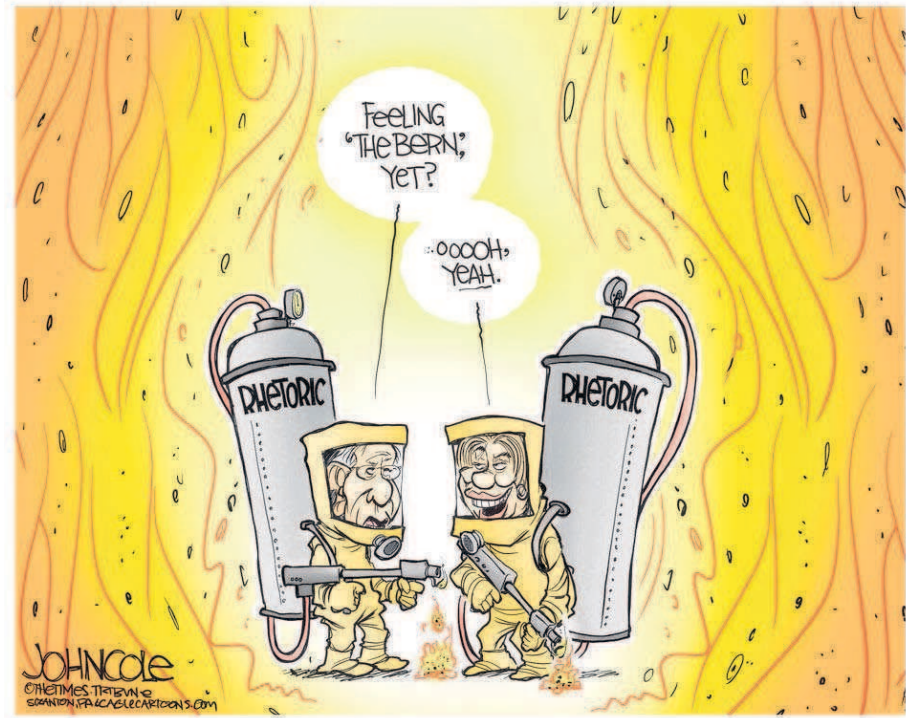
Last week Umatilla County honored some of the people working to make this county a healthier place at the second public health fundraiser and awareness dinner. Commissioner George Murdock said he would like to see the Umatilla County Health Department become a "lighthouse" for the state, not accepting the status quo of mediocre-to-poor health.

Some results of that work are being seen. Dr. Jonathan Hitzman, who was picked as the county's Health Hero, shared that the smoking rate in the county dropped from 22 percent to 17 percent in the last three years, and the number of uninsured people went from 23 to 20 percent.

However, our obesity rate is still high (32 percent in county vs. 26 percent statewide) and we have nearly half as many primary care physicians per person as the rest of the state.

The infamous "Rural-Urban Divide" sometimes only seems like a rhetorical tool ginned up by the political hate-meisters of talk radio. However, there is legitimate pain on America's back roads. Attention must be paid.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.



OTHER VIEWS

Happy Birthday, Beverly Cleary

One of the world's great inventions, only a little behind the light bulb, was Ramona Quimby, the strong-willed, lovable and exasperating star of "Ramona the Pest" and other books. For decades the Ramona books have been a gateway drug luring young readers into the spellbinding world of books.

Ramona's inventor, Beverly Cleary, has sold 85 million copies of her books about Ramona, Henry Huggins, Ralph S. Mouse and other beloved figures. Cleary will turn 100 on Tuesday, so I asked her about her characters, her life and her wisdom.

Now living in a retirement home in Carmel, California, she immediately disclaimed any grand thoughts about reaching a century.

"I didn't plan on it," she explained dryly.

Cleary's only long-range plan is that when the time comes, she'll return to her hometown, Yamhill, Oregon, to be buried beside her late husband in the local cemetery. As it happens, I'm also from Yamhill, population about 1,000, and Cleary is our hometown hero.

As a girl, Cleary was a late reader because she didn't find most children's books very interesting. In her first-grade class, she was assigned to the lowest reading group, the Backbirds, and her teacher, Miss Falb, beat her on the palms for daydreaming.

So Cleary tried to drop out of school in the first grade. But her parents forced her to keep going, and Cleary eventually excelled in school and in college and found a job as a librarian in Yakima, Washington. A boy there complained that there weren't any books about kids like him.

In response, Cleary sat down and wrote about Henry Huggins and his dog, Spareribs. She thought her characters needed siblings, so she decided to torment Henry's friend Beezus with a pesky little sister — "and at that moment someone called out 'Ramona,' so I named her Ramona."

An editor suggested a few changes — such as turning "Spareribs" into "Ribsy" — and the book was published to immediate acclaim. Later volumes followed, including a series



NICHOLAS KRISTOF
Comment

focused on Ramona, one of the great figures in children's literature.

Cleary says Ramona is her favorite character but isn't directly modeled on her. "I was a well-behaved girl," she said, "but I often thought like Ramona."

Cleary's works depict ordinary events drawn from her own childhood. Her cousin once caught a salmon with his bare hands, so she had Henry Huggins spotting and tackling a 29-pound salmon in an ocean stream.

That left a deep impression on me as a boy, and ever since I've looked carefully in ocean streams for monster salmon.

In telling these stories, Cleary always refrains from inflicting larger lessons.

"As a child, I very much objected to books that tried to teach me something," she told me. "I just wanted to read for pleasure, and I did. But if a book tried to teach me, I returned it to the library."

Cleary says that when she goes back to Yamhill, everything seems the same as ever — except that now the kids aren't playing in the streets but are inside watching television.

There's something to that. On any given day, U.S. children ages 8 to 12 consume almost six hours of entertainment, such as television, video games and social media, according to polling by Common Sense Media. Aside from schoolwork, 57 percent of those kids typically don't read at all.

We measure child poverty by household income, but a better metric might be how often a child hears stories read aloud. To honor Cleary's birthday, school organizations are calling on kids and parents to "drop everything and read."

So it's time to take a break from sordid politics to celebrate authors like Cleary who inspire us to read. Let's make what Ramona would call "a great big noisy fuss" about her creator's 100th birthday — for as they invent new worlds, great writers enrich our own.

Nicholas Kristof grew up on a sheep and cherry farm in Yamhill. Kristof, a columnist for The New York Times since 2001, writes op-ed columns that appear twice a week. He won the Pulitzer Prize two times, in 1990 and 2006.

YOUR VIEWS

School bond a display of community pride

Please vote "Yes" to approve the Athena-Weston safety and maintenance bond; inclusive of a \$4 million state matching grant.

It is not unusual to read in the newspaper or hear on the news about communities that have not invested in their schools. My experience as the incoming superintendent for Athena-Weston public schools is just the opposite. In touring the local schools and talking to staff, students, and community members; community pride is easily recognized. Many individuals have shared stories of growing up in the community, moving away and then returning with fond memories of the education they received. It is critical that we maintain this tradition of excellence for our community's children.

The most exciting aspect of this bond initiative is that the state will provide an equal match to the local contribution. Oregon State has awarded only six matching grants and Athena-Weston was one of the six communities selected. The cost for taxpayers is an increase of \$0.44 per \$1000 of assessed property value. If the local bond

does not pass, the state matching dollars will be awarded to another school district. This is a unique opportunity to impact overall safety and general maintenance with the state matching the community investment dollar for dollar.

Staff and students in Athena-Weston deserve buildings that are safe and functional. A "Yes" vote on May 17 speaks volumes about a community that values safety, maintenance of educational facilities and ultimately the education of our future leaders. For more information go to the district website for a bond fact sheet and video presentation.

Laure Quaresma
Walla Walla

Forest access keeps getting the ax

We have been working since 2009 to have our voices heard on the Forest Service plan and access to our public lands. It has not gained any headway other than the government holds meetings then does what it pleases and advises that more roads are going to be closed and citizens' access are

going to be further reduced.

It is important to have checks and balances to protect our wildlife and we see those seasonal closures in place, which allows the animals a period where they are not to be "harassed."

We have plenty of wilderness area where people must walk in if they want to obtain access to any of the grounds. By the USFS statistics, these wilderness areas are not accessed or used as greatly as the public lands that one has access to by vehicles. There is a reason for that. People get older and cannot walk as far as younger people, but that does not stop their use of the forest and streams.

Recently we noticed near Ukiah a road closure. We asked a friend who works for the USFS about the closure and was told that it was on the 1989 list to be closed. This closure was before any of our citizen groups were established. This road had previously been closed seasonally only, but now this road is permanently closed.

Many of the roads being closed were pioneer roads paid for by tax dollars and taxpayers. The USFS doesn't do a great deal of road maintenance and we truly aren't asking them to do any, but we are asking

that they stop closing roads so historically we can continue some of our heritage events the same as the Native Americans do with their hunting elk at other times when our elk seasons aren't open. This statement isn't said with meanness or racial overtones; we are all human, even though we are not Native Americans we too have a right to our heritage.

We have taken Scout Troops in to teach the young about forest and fauna, how to catch fish and cook them, search for animal tracks and identify them, and enjoy a dark night with stars shining bright. We take our grandkids in swimming and rafting, picnicking, horn hunting, mushroom hunting, wood cutting and gathering, and hunting deer, elk and turkey.

Our interest is having public lands for our great-grandchildren and their children even if they are in a wheelchair or a veteran who has given part of his body for our country and cannot walk. This public land does not belong to the USFS or the BLM, it belongs to all of us; they are only the managers and their customer service doesn't smell very good.

Patricia Maier
Hermiston

LETTERS POLICY

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less on public issues and public policies for publication in the newspaper and on our website. The newspaper reserves the right to withhold letters that address concerns about individual services and products or letters that infringe on the rights of private citizens. Submitted letters must be signed by the author and include the city of residence and a daytime phone number. The phone number will not be published. Unsigned letters will not be published. Send letters to Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801 or email editor@eastoregonian.com.