

# EAST OREGONIAN

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## OUR VIEW

# Smear plan gives OHA a bad look

Although the plan went nowhere, Oregonians should be outraged that a state agency even considered planting negative news stories about a health-care nonprofit.

The *Portland Tribune* broke the story last week about the Oregon Health Authority proposal to promote negative news coverage and undermine the credibility of FamilyCare Health, one of the state's coordinated care organizations.

The draft communications plan included looking for an HIV patient who would complain about FamilyCare and trying to get a journalist to write about that patient's experience. Journalists often work off such tips, but it's beyond callous for a state agency — the state health agency! — to consider exploiting a patient in such a way.

The plan never was implemented. Lynne Saxton, director of the Oregon Health Authority, said it was part of an initial draft that was soon squelched.

"If something bad happens [at OHA], I take full responsibility for it, as I am doing here," she told us on Monday.

Saxton said she encourages her staff to be creative. But the fact that anyone in a state agency would even suggest planting negative news stories raises questions about the culture at the Oregon Health Authority, and even the leadership of Democratic Gov. Kate Brown.

"This is outrageous. I've never heard or seen anything like this," said state Sen. Jackie Winters, R-Salem, whose roots in state government reach back to the Tom McCall administration.

"This is not the Oregon way. Our way is to work collaboratively and hammer out compromises, not to throw people under the bus just because you disagree with them."

OHA already had raised eyebrows

this year for its aggressive press releases about its dispute with the FamilyCare, with which the health authority has been in litigation and mediation for two-and-a-half years.

It's been a tough year for the state health department. This spring, Republican legislators criticized OHA and the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality for attempting "to push a misleading story line" regarding health and environmental concerns at Entek International in Lebanon. Legislators also were upset that OHA may have been authorizing state-paid health care to substantial numbers of Oregonians who were ineligible, despite assurances to the Legislature that everything was under control.

Against that backdrop, it's troubling that the state was slow to respond to last week's *Tribune* article.

Saxton told us that she would be sending a letter of apology to Oregon's coordinated care organizations, assuring them that OHA would treat them fairly and would not tolerate negative public relations efforts. She also will ask the state Department of Justice to train her staff on attorney-client privileges.

Those may be worthwhile steps, assuming they promote transparency and openness instead of finding ways to hide "creative" ideas under the veil of attorney-client privilege. Still, it is disconcerting that the Governor's office did not immediately respond to the *Tribune's* revelations; and, as of this writing, still had not done so.

One leading Republican candidate for governor, Bend Rep. Knute Buehler, said the OHA negative-publicity plan — even though it never was implemented — demonstrates arrogance and a lack of accountability by a state agency. The state's CEO, Gov. Kate Brown, should recognize that as well.

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

# EPA a swamp worth draining

Like the road to Hell, liberal ideas are usually paved with good intentions. But, as Ronald Reagan once said, "The trouble with our liberal friends is not that they are ignorant, but that they know so much that isn't so." And all that vast "unknowledge" births monster government agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency.

Today's EPA is an agency gone wild, filled with environmental extremists and deep state holdovers who have little accountability for their actions. They arrogantly create rules like the "Clean Power Plan," which the Institute for Energy Research [IER] said was filled with about as much junk as the EPA and its contractors pumped into Colorado's Animas River in 2015.

EPA's new administrator, Scott Pruitt, visited the Animas River site August 4 saying the agency "should be held to the same standard as those we regulate." Pruitt said the Obama administration "failed those who counted on them to protect the environment." They also refused to pay claims to many of those they harmed due to "sovereign immunity."

President Trump's promise to "drain the swamp" is happening organically with employees resigning over Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, as well as his March 28 executive order mandating review of the Clean Power Plan, which effectually triggers the skyrocketing electricity prices Obama promised.

The EPA claimed the plan would "save" thousands of lives, probably as effectively as Obama's stimulus plan "saved" jobs. It was also supposed to improve the climate and our health, that is, barring more EPA-caused environmental disasters like the Animas River spill.

Environmentalists have gone bonkers over Trump mandating a review of this costly and burdensome plan, but were mysteriously silent when the Animas spill caused \$400 million in economic



**SUSAN STAMPER BROWN**  
Comment

damage when it sent 3 million gallons of tainted wastewater into rivers in Colorado, New Mexico and Utah.

We are expected to ignore that the Clean Power Plan will, at best, reduce global temperatures by a negligible one hundredth of a degree, Celsius, according to the Obama administration's former Assistant Secretary of Energy, Charles McConnell.

The plan offers little mercy to millions of Americans burning wood to stay warm, imposing a ban on the sale and production of 80 percent of America's wood burning stoves. Forbes.com says, "Most wood stoves that warm cabins and homes from coast-to-coast can't meet that standard. Older stoves that don't, cannot be traded in for updated types, but instead must be rendered inoperable, destroyed, or recycled as scrap metal."

Or, maybe the EPA could just throw scrapped stoves down the Animas River.

In the aftermath of the toxic spill, and with infinitesimal accountability for its actions, this agency marches forward in an unrelenting mission to control our lives, one unlegislated regulation at a time.

A Wyoming man had to sue the EPA to get it off his back for building a stock pond on his property. He was threatened with \$37,500 per day fines because "material" from his pond flows into other waterways. It mattered not that the "other waterways" is a manmade irrigation ditch where the water is used for agriculture. Nor did it matter that the Wyoming State Engineer's Office permitted the pond.

Certainly, the "material" from his pristine pond, fit for fish and waterfowl to flourish and cattle to drink, did not turn waterways a toxic Animas River orange.

If Trump wants to prove he really cares about the environment, he could start with this heavy-handed bureaucracy swamp in dire need of draining.

Susan Stamper Brown lives in Alaska and writes about culture, politics and current events.



## OTHER VIEWS

# What's next for progressives?

For now, at least, the attempt to repeal the Affordable Care Act appears dead. Sabotage by a spiteful Trump administration is still a risk, but there is — gasp! — a bipartisan push to limit the damage, with Democrats who want to preserve recent gains allying with Republicans who fear that the public will blame them for declining coverage and rising premiums.

This represents a huge victory for progressives, who did a startlingly good job of marshaling facts, mobilizing public opinion, and pressuring politicians to stand their ground. But where do they go from here? If Democrats regain control of Congress and the White House, what will they do with the opportunity?

Well, some progressives — by and large people who supported Bernie Sanders in the primaries — are already trying to revive one of his signature proposals: expanding Medicare to cover everyone. Some even want to make support for single-payer a litmus test for Democratic candidates.

So it's time for a little pushback. A commitment to universal health coverage — bringing in the people currently falling through Obamacare's cracks — should definitely be a litmus test. But single-payer, while it has many virtues, isn't the only way to get there; it would be much harder politically than its advocates acknowledge; and there are more important priorities.

The key point to understand about universal coverage is that we know a lot about what it takes, because every other wealthy country has it. How do they do it? Actually, lots of different ways.

Look at the latest report by the nonpartisan Commonwealth Fund, comparing health care performance among advanced nations. America is at the bottom; the top three performers are Britain, Australia, and the Netherlands. And the thing is, these three leaders have very different systems.

Britain has true socialized medicine: The government provides health care directly through the National Health Service. Australia has a single-payer system, basically Medicare for All — it's even called Medicare. But the Dutch have what we might call Obamacare done right: individuals are required to buy coverage from regulated private insurers, with subsidies to help them afford the premiums.

And the Dutch system works, which suggests that a lot could be accomplished via incremental improvements in the ACA, rather than radical change. Further evidence for this view is how relatively well Obamacare, imperfect as it is, already works in states that try to make it work — did you know that only 5.4 percent of New Yorkers are now uninsured?



**PAUL KRUGMAN**  
Comment

Meanwhile, the political logic that led to Obamacare rather than Medicare for all still applies.

It's not just about paying off the insurance industry, although getting insurers to buy in to health reform wasn't foolish, and arguably helped save the ACA: At a crucial moment America's Health Insurance Plans, the industry lobbying organization, and Blue Cross Blue Shield intervened to denounce Republican plans.

A far more important consideration is minimizing disruption to the 156 million people who currently get insurance through their employers, and are largely satisfied with their coverage. Moving to single-payer would mean taking away this coverage and imposing new taxes; to make it fly politically you'd have to convince most of these people both that they would save more in premiums than they pay in additional taxes, and that their new coverage would be just as good as the old.

This might in fact be true, but it would be one heck of a hard sell. Is this really where progressives want to spend their political capital?

What would I do instead? I'd enhance the ACA, not replace it, although I would strongly support reintroducing some form of public option — a way for people to buy into public insurance — that could eventually lead to single-payer.

Meanwhile, progressives should move beyond health care and focus on other holes in the U.S. safety net.

When you compare the U.S. social welfare system with those of other wealthy countries, what really stands out now is our neglect of children. Other countries provide new parents with extensive paid leave, provide high-quality, subsidized day care for children with working parents and make pre-K available to everyone or almost everyone; we do none of these things. Our spending on families is a third of the advanced-country average, putting us down there with Mexico and Turkey.

So if it were up to me, I'd talk about improving the ACA, not ripping it up and starting over, while opening up a new progressive front on child care.

I have nothing against single-payer; it's what I'd support if we were starting fresh. But we aren't: Getting there from here would be very hard, and might not accomplish much more than a more modest, incremental approach. Even idealists need to set priorities, and Medicare-for-all shouldn't be at the top of the list.

Paul Krugman joined *The New York Times* in 1999 as a columnist on the *Op-Ed Page* and continues as professor of Economics and International Affairs at Princeton University.

## CULTURE CORNER

# It's a bird, it's a plane ... it's Bugs Bunny?

Batman's archenemy is The Joker. The Legion of Super-Heroes found their inspiration in Superboy. Wonder Woman is nigh unbeatable.

DC Comics long ago established those superhero histories, and this past June the entertainment giant stood them on their heads. Not through the typical messy character revisions comic shops too often engage in.

Nope. DC teamed up with Looney Tunes.

You thought Bugs Bunny was the ultimate trickster? Or Elmer Fudd was just a funny wittle man?

Think again.

DC issued six one-shot crossovers between the two universes. Wonder Woman has her work cut out taking on the Tasmanian Devil. Yosemite Sam might regret seeking the help of DC's brooding antihero Jonah Hex. The



Courtesy DC Comics/Looney Tunes

Martian Manhunter can't let Marvin the Martian use his "Explosive Space Modulator" to destroy earth.

And Fudd, forever chasing that wascally wabbit, trudges out of the Looney Tunes' vivid animations to gloomy Gotham to track down the Dark Knight himself.

The hunt is on, so be vewy, vewy quiet.

The takes on all these match-ups are not mere parodies. That would be easy. Fudd fitting into Gotham's underbelly, for example, makes for something more intriguing.

The poet Ezra Pound proclaimed "Make It New," the

mantra of modernism. "In a world where" each month seems to bring another superhero TV show or movie, these six comic books embrace that artistic ideal while seeking to inject a real sense of fun into a genre becoming less shiny by the day. — Phil Wright, reporter

## LETTERS POLICY

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