

Governor Brown signs drug price transparency bill

Capital Bureau

Gov. Kate Brown has signed into law a bill that requires pharmaceutical manufacturers to publicly disclose reasons for steep increases in drug prices.

Several other states, including California, have taken similar measures as the prices of drugs have skyrocketed without an apparent reason.

House Bill 4005 won bipartisan sponsorship and overwhelming support in both the House and Senate.

“Every Oregonian should be able to access the medications and treatments that allow them to live healthy, productive lives,” Brown said in a statement Tuesday. “This bill brings



Courtesy FDA

Gov. Kate Brown has signed a bill requiring pharmaceutical manufacturers to disclose reasons for steep increases in the price of prescription drugs.

greater transparency around drug pricing, an important

step towards making life-saving and essential drugs more available and affordable.”

When the price of a prescription drug increases greater than 10 percent, the bill requires the manufacturer to report the reasons to the Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services, including information related to the cost of production, advertising, marketing and research. The manufacturer also must disclose their profits from the drug and whether generic alternatives are available. Manufacturers face civil penalties of up to \$10,000 per day for noncompliance.

The deadline for the first report is July 1, 2019.

Under the new law,

the consumer services department is required to publicly post a list of the drugs that have had high price increases, hold annual public meetings about prescription drug prices and make recommendations to the state Legislature for additional measures to curb drug prices.

Insurance companies also are required to report the 25 most expensive prescription drugs in their plans, which ones have increased the most and how those costs affect premiums.

With federal inaction on drug prices, several other states have enacted laws to monitor drug prices and enhance transparency around pricing. Among them are California, Maryland,

Nevada, New York and Vermont, according to a report by the *Washington Post*.

About a dozen other state legislatures are considering or debating variations of drug transparency measures, according to a Feb. 28 report by Policy and Medicine.

Between 2013 and 2015, national spending on prescription drugs increased by about 20 percent and accounted for an estimated 17 percent of health care spending, according to research published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Unlike most industrial countries, the United States does not negotiate the price of prescription drugs with manufacturers. As a result,

Americans pay more for most drugs.

“Too many people in our community are making hard choices between paying for medications or food and rent,” said Vida resident Nancy Plemons, a patient who testified in support of the Oregon bill. “Patients like me appreciate the support of Governor Brown and lawmakers from both sides of the aisle who worked so hard to get this bill passed for Oregonians who are grappling with the ever-increasing price of prescription drugs.”

The bill was sponsored by Rep. Rob Nossie, D-Portland, Rep. Ron Noble, R-McMinnville, Sen. Dennis Linthicum, R-Klamath Falls, and Sen. Lee Beyer, D-Springfield.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Longtime patient Dorys Grover gives a bag of books to Dr. Norman Sitz during a checkup on Tuesday in Pendleton.

HEALTH: Obesity increasing in Umatilla County

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gory, which looks at length and quality of life. Umatilla County came in 15th, up from 16th in 2017.

The differing results may seem like a discrepancy, but not necessarily, said Racquel Bournhonesque, a county coach for the County Health Records & Roadmaps, which produces the annual study.

The key is to look for trends. She pointed for example to Umatilla County's teen birth rate, which dropped from 51 births per 1,000 girls in 2017.

“Umatilla County is actually doing better than previous years. This number has gone down and down,” Bournhonesque said. “Even though the number is high, it has been declining in this county for more than a decade.”

Getting a snapshot of health care and assessing it properly can be headache-inducing.

“There isn't one easy answer to the story in Umatilla County,” she said.

“It is complicated. It's not a simple picture.”

Relative improvement came in other categories, too. Fewer children live in poverty (19 percent compared with 26 percent in 2017) and a smaller percentage of adults are unemployed (5.4 versus 6.5 percent).

Still, Umatilla County Public Health Administrator Jim Setzer worries about certain health behaviors that seem to resist the efforts of educators. “Obesity and smoking — these are going to catch up with us.” Obesity has become normalized, he said, pointing to a graph that showed Umatilla County obesity trending upward over a decade, much like the trend for the state and nation.

“We're fatter than the rest of the pack, but we're all going in the same wrong direction,” Setzer said.

He urged people to not throw up their hands, but rather take small steps toward health.

“People overestimate how much exercise they need to make a positive

impact on their health,” Setzer said. “It doesn't need to be 55 minutes a day, seven days a week. Anything's better than nothing. We can all do little things that begin to make a positive impact.”

Bournhonesque said the health rankings revealed health care gaps all around the nation.

“Not everyone has the same opportunity to be healthy,” she said. “The rankings show that where you live influences how well and how long you live.”

These gaps persist not only geographically, but by race and ethnicity, she said.

The study, for example, drilled down into the number of teen births in Umatilla County and found that Hispanic teenage girls give birth at a higher rate than white teens (57 per 1,000 for Hispanics versus 37 for whites). Babies born to teenage Hispanic mothers also have a slightly higher risk of low birthweight.

Another factor, the number of children in poverty, could shed some

light. While 19 percent of the county's children are impoverished overall, 29 percent of Hispanic children live in poverty.

Meanwhile, Morrow County fared a little differently than Umatilla in the report, ranking 19th for health outcomes and 21st for health factors. Sixteen percent of adults smoke. Thirty-one percent of adults are obese. Like Umatilla County, Morrow has a shortage of doctors and dentists. Nineteen percent of children live in poverty. The county's high school graduation rate is 74 percent.

According to the rankings, the healthiest county in Oregon is Washington County, followed by Benton, Clackamas, Hood River and Deschutes. The five unhealthiest counties are Jefferson, Klamath, Lincoln, Josephine and Douglas.

To see the full report, go to www.countyhealthrankings.org.

Contact Kathy Aney at kaney@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0810.

Revenue Department ready to answer taxpayer questions

People making less than \$66,000 or who serve in military qualify for free filing

By CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Have questions about your taxes?

While the Oregon Department of Revenue can't help you prepare your taxes line by line, the department can answer general questions, such as what a term on your tax form means.

The department has 22 full-time staff and four seasonal workers on hand to help in the tax services unit.

In addition to the main Department of Revenue office in Salem, there are also five regional offices — Portland, Eugene, Gresham, Bend and Medford — where taxpayers can walk in to ask questions or to make payments.

A spokeswoman for the Department of Revenue recommends going to the department's website first, oregon.gov/dor, to see if the information there answers your question or questions.

If not, you can email questions.dor@oregon.gov, or call the department's toll-free number, 800-356-4222.

What's the most commonly asked question?

“When will I get my refund?” says Joy Krawczyk, a spokeswoman for the Department of Revenue. Taxpayers can check the status of their refund at the department's website as well. The department also gets a lot of questions about tax credits and deductions, Krawczyk said.

For detailed preparation help, the department recommends seeing whether

you qualify for free tax preparation help from the AARP, CASH Oregon or United Way's MyFreeTaxes program.

The Internal Revenue Service also has a free program: in any state, if you meet the qualifications, you can get free help filing your federal taxes through private tax prep vendors such as H&R Block.

Generally speaking, people making less than \$66,000, or those who serve in the military, qualify for the service.

Oregon is also one of about two dozen states that allow those same taxpayers to get free help filing their state returns in the same way.

You can find more information about whether you qualify, and which companies might be able to provide you the free service, at irs.gov/freefile.

And what if you make a mistake? According to the revenue department, you can turn in an amended form by turning in a correct version of the same form, but checking a box stating the return is amended. The amended return will supersede the initial return.

Meanwhile, the Department of Revenue is working on adapting to changes contained in the federal tax reforms signed into law by the president in December.

Since the changes start in the 2018 tax year, you won't see changes on your personal income taxes for your payments for the 2017 tax year. However, you may already see changes to the amount of tax dollars withheld from your paycheck.

Oregon is expected to collect about \$17.5 billion in personal income taxes in the current two-year budget cycle, which began July 1 and ends June 30, 2019.

EXTENSION: Ag-based economies at heart of budget

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Morrow County this year gave \$118,825 for the service plus \$48,240 for an extension agent, and is taking the same approach as Umatilla County. Melissa Lindsay, chair of Morrow County commissioners, said she anticipates the next budget will contain funds for the Extension. That likely is to happen even if the district passes, she said, because the tax revenue might not be available for a year.

While neither Givens or Lindsay could say what their long-term funding would be if the district is approved by taxpayers, both said it could be reduced.

Corp has been out making presentations on OSU Extension and the special districts, the most recent Monday night in Adams. She said people are asking smart questions about the proposal and expressing support for the Extension's work and programs.

Even so, she said she

finds people tend to know the Extension Service by one program they interact with, such as 4-H or the Master Gardener program. She said they do not always see the whole Extension pie, including the Columbia Basin Agricultural Research Center north of Pendleton and the Hermiston Agricultural Research and Extension Center, where scientists experiment to improve farming practices.

“We take it from the seed to the supper on the tables,” Corp said.

Givens said Umatilla County has an agricultural-based economy, and the OSU Extension is “not just one narrow focused program” but touches on ag throughout the area. Every \$1 ag brings in, he said, generates another \$5-\$7 in the community.

Corp said outside of the upcoming vote, the two boards of commissioners decide if or how much their counties support OSU Extension.

WATER: County, city to split \$1M from Lamb Weston

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for developers and could also decrease expenses for Hermiston School District, which hopes to pass a bond to build a new elementary school on Theater Lane.

Starting in 2020 and running for 15 years, Lamb Weston will pay \$1 million per year split evenly between the county and city instead of property taxes on a \$225 million expansion in Hermiston.

The county has agreed to give its first \$2 million to the city for the water project, which also meets county goals for housing and workforce development. The city will cover the rest of the costs and handle design and construction, using a bridge loan with 3.5 percent interest that will be paid off using the Lamb Weston payments, and hopes to also recoup some costs through an increased property tax base as more houses are built.

The project will include



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Members of the Hermiston Kiwanis Club scour the field north of Theater Lane.

a million gallon water tank at the corner of Northeast 10th Street and East Punkin Center, plus 2.25 miles of water mains.

“If you need to paint (the water tower) you have permission to paint ‘We love Umatilla County’ on it,” commissioner George

Murdock told the council.

Contact Jade McDowell at jmcdowell@eastoregonian.com or 541-564-4536.