

ALEX
SKOG

OTHER VIEWS

Bill could prevent violence in emergency departments

House Bill 4142 could prevent violence in emergency departments

Among the many ripple effects of the pandemic, in the last two years health care workers have reported a disturbingly prolific increase in assaults while they are providing care. According to surveys by the American College of Emergency Physicians and the Emergency Nurses Association, almost half of emergency physicians and 70% of emergency nurses reported being physically assaulted on the job. This phenomenon is not simply something that is showing up in esoteric statistical data but it is playing out every day in Oregon's hospitals.

Several weeks ago, I was toward the end of one of a string of 5 p.m. to 1 a.m. emergency department shifts that had prevented me from seeing my two young children for four days straight. A COVID-19 test on an older patient I was taking care of came back positive. The patient had a low oxygen level necessitating admission to the hospital. As I started to discuss the unfortunate result with the patient and family, the patient's son stood up from his chair and walked up to me screaming that he wouldn't let me admit his father to the hospital so that I could put his father on a ventilator and kill him. I explained that my only goal was to do everything possible to make his father get better and that a ventilator was only a last resort. He pushed his jacket back to reveal a gun holster strapped to his hip and said, "If anything happens to my father, I will kill you and your family. It will be World War III."

Fortunately, I was able to get out of the room and call security and subsequently police. Police officers escorted the patient's son out to his car in the parking lot where he undoubtedly left the firearm that he carried in the holster he was wearing. I was left in the emergency department unarmed and virtually defenseless.

Acts like this don't just effect the health care provider personally but send shockwaves that reverberate long after the incident's immediate aftermath.

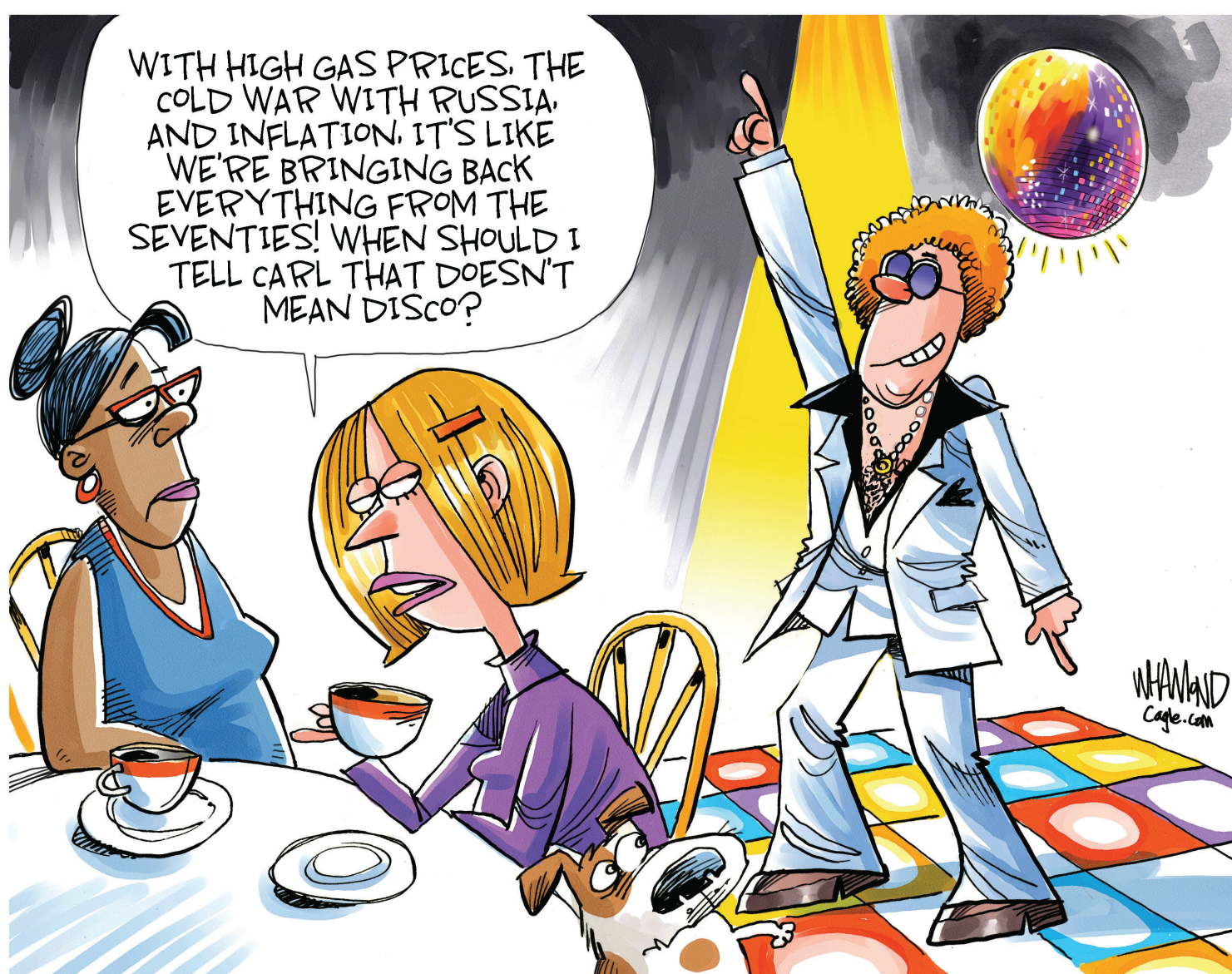
For the remainder of my shift I caught myself regularly looking at the security camera video screen, hoping not to see the ED doors sliding open to reveal this person returning. I listened for any commotion in the waiting room, instead of focusing on a nurse asking me to confirm the correct medication for another patient. While trying to see the remaining patients who had overwhelmed us during the latest COVID-19 surge, I found my mind regularly drifting to my two sons whom I hadn't seen in four days. This person had my name and, therefore, would be able to find my address where my children were sleeping.

Unfortunately, this type of experience is far from unique, and numerous Oregon hospital workers have stories where threats have progressed to actual assault. An emergency department technician was tackled, causing ligaments in his knee to tear, requiring surgery. A pregnant nurse was kicked in the abdomen and went into premature labor. A provider was strangled with the stethoscope that hung around her neck. The effect of these assaults goes far beyond the immediate physical and emotional trauma they cause by fueling the never-before-seen exodus of health care workers and leaving the most vulnerable Oregonians sicker and further marginalized with substandard care.

Oregon has an opportunity to make a major stride toward addressing this by passing HB 4142. In doing so, Oregon would join 34 other states with similar laws, which make it a felony to assault a hospital employee while specifically shielding vulnerable Oregonians in mental health crises from being charged. Currently, it is only a misdemeanor to assault a hospital employee. Victims of assault have been told by police that it is not worth the paperwork to charge the assailant. It is past time for this to change.

House Bill 4142's greatest impact will be its effect on the numerous patients I see daily who have red flags on their chart for previous history of assaulting health care workers. Currently, these repeat offenders know that there are virtually no legal repercussions from past assaults and, therefore, are completely uninhibited and emboldened to do it again. Having actual consequences will change this calculation.

Dr. Alex Skog is an emergency physician and president-elect of the Oregon Chapter of the American College of Emergency Physicians.



State Senate Democrats draw line on masks

DICK
HUGHES

OTHER VIEWS

When I was a kid, there was a short-lived TV program called "Slattery's People." The plot centered around a state legislator. That probably explains why the audience soon faded, even though one co-star was Ed Asner, before he became the popular character Lou Grant.

I remember nothing about "Slattery's People" except that each episode opened with these words: "Democracy is a very bad form of government. But I ask you never to forget: All the others are so much worse."

That admonition was a play on a quotation from Winston Churchill, which I didn't realize at the time. But the words left a lifelong impression on me. They again hit me full in the face Thursday morning, Feb. 24, as I read the news about global developments, a stark contrast to American democracy despite its multitude of flaws.

Certainly, the messiness of democracy has been on display at the Oregon State Capitol during the Legislature's 35-day session. A veteran Oregon legislator recently mused, "You're always caught between your conscience, your caucus and your constituents."

His insight was powerful. I'll add a corollary: When those three influences do align, legislators often find themselves pitted against their colleagues.

Such was the case Feb. 24 for state Sen. Dallas Heard, R-Roseburg.

On a party-line vote, Democratic senators booted him from the Senate floor — and the entire Capitol — for not wearing a face covering, as is required by legislative and state rules. Heard, who also is

chairman of the Oregon Republican Party, rarely has been on the Senate floor this year because he opposes this mask mandate.

The dramatic scene rolled out in mostly calm, respectful tones. Bear in mind, however, the tone can shift quickly as legislators rush to pass, modify or kill bills before the March 7 deadline for them to adjourn the 2022 session.

As an example of that nimble or hasty pace — pick your preferred description — the newly formed Joint Committee on Farm Worker Overtime met for the first time Feb. 24 and heard pro-and-con testimony on House Bill 4002.

To protect against the spread of COVID-19, all committee meetings are by video-conference and phone. At one point, Sen. Kathleen Taylor, D-Portland, who co-chairs the committee, paused to remind people testifying that they should be respectful of folks on the other side.

As for Heard, Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, had ordered him escorted off the Senate floor during December's special session when Heard refused to wear a mask. This time, Heard refused to go, forcing the Senate vote.

Their interactions were firm but polite. Heard said no one should be forced to wear a mask and that his protest was about standing up for the young children of America. "These rules are not moral. A mask is not moral," he said. "These mandates don't work if the ultimate goal is to protect our children."

Courtney responded by asking him not to create a hole in the Senate family: "Sen. Heard, you were kind enough, and gentleman enough, to text me this morning and say, 'Good morning, brother.'"

Speakers on both sides said to follow the science. But they — like their fellow Americans — differed on what science says.

Sen. Dennis Linthicum, R-Klamath Falls, said masks don't work, and senators don't need masks because they aren't carrying the coronavirus anyway.

Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, responded that individuals don't know at any given moment whether they have the coronavirus, so masks are worn to guard against transmitting it to others.

Republicans pointed out that lawmakers frequently violate the mask mandate elsewhere in the Capitol, such as when going to the restroom or parking areas.

Legislators, though masked, often gather less than 6 feet apart while chatting informally.

Side note: Constituent newsletters from Sen. Akasha Lawrence Spence, D-Portland, have said immune-compromised people such as she cannot be vaccinated. She contracted COVID-19 before the 2022 session and self-isolated but has returned to the Capitol.

Some senators seemed unaware that earlier Feb. 24, Gov. Kate Brown and state agencies had announced the indoor mask mandate and the state's COVID-19 state of emergency soon would end.

During the debate, Senate Republican Leader Tim Knopp, of Bend, joked that Brown's action was a belated response to his letter urging her to lift all mask mandates by noon Feb. 23.

Knopp had written, "After nearly two years of constant masking, it would be a breath of fresh air for Oregonians to see their democratically elected representatives in the Legislature remove their masks and do their business." Though Brown didn't comply with his deadline, she and Knopp talked by phone later Feb. 23.

Senate Majority Leader Rob Wagner, D-Lake Oswego, officially made the motion that Heard had violated the rules and should be excluded from the Senate chamber and the Capitol until he complied.

"Sadly, please call the roll," Courtney instructed the Senate staff when it came time to vote.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.

Protect climate-storing forests on public, private lands

MARINA
RICHIE

OTHER VIEWS

The morning after Valentine's Day, I woke to heartening climate news. A coalition of 70 environmental groups called on President Joe Biden to protect our mature and old-growth forests on federal land. But we also must urge Biden to take measures to protect our private forestlands, too.

Thousands of acres are being felled in the Southeast U.S. alone to feed the dirty wood pellet industry and to fuel biomass energy in the U.K. and Japan. Logging rates in the Southeast are four times as high as in South American rainforests.

Many of these targeted forests are bottomland hardwoods — magnificent big trees pulling carbon dioxide from the air and storing it for long periods. The wild groves harbor precious biodiversity and are havens of beauty.

Biomass is touted as a renewable source of energy and it's far from it. Biomass burning power plants emit 150% the carbon dioxide of coal, and 300 – 400% the carbon dioxide of natural gas, per unit energy produced.

The "renewable" argument goes this way — trees grow back and will then once again store carbon. But trees burned today release

carbon dioxide today — and the new trees if planted (no guarantee) would take a long time to rival the carbon storage of trees that are even 30 years old, let alone a century or more. Scientific studies are conclusive that the older and bigger trees store far more carbon and for longer than young trees.

So why would we want to add even more carbon dioxide into our atmosphere now with some vague notion we will lower it later? Checking the latest daily CO₂, the recorded level is close to 419 parts per million. Here in the West we now know the megadrought is the driest in 1,200 years.

We're getting ever closer to a point of no return — an unlivable planet.

We desperately need to lower carbon dioxide levels. Instead, we're adding a staggering 40 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide per year while we're destroying forests and other natural ecosystems. We live in a terrifying time.

Returning to the biomass debacle, I am mystified why we're taking this route, especially when the wood pellet industry and biomass burning are heavily subsidized. They could not succeed on their own. There's also the insidious and untrue argument that biomass energy simply uses up excess pieces of wood that would otherwise go to waste. No. Biomass creates a huge drive for wood, wood and more wood to burn.

Fortunately, there are courageous people and groups standing up for our forests and calling for an end to subsidies for biomass and for incentives for forest owners to

protect their trees for the climate, for biodiversity and for our children and their children.

I just received aerial footage from one of those conservationists after his recent flight over a 120 square mile area in Virginia in the vicinity of an Envia pellet plant. I was horrified by the scarred clearcuts, all that was left of hardwood forests along rivers. However, we can only fathom the true loss when we know the beauty of wild woodlands close-up.

My parents once lived near Wilmington, North Carolina, and from my visits there I have vivid images of paddling a canoe with my dad on the Cape Fear River, our strokes in rhythm with the serenades of warblers flitting among leafy trees rising from still dark waters and the thrum of woodpeckers drumming hollow buttressed trees. When I think of these irreplaceable and complex forests crashing to the ground, I am more than heartbroken.

It's past time to choose true climate solutions. Pay our landowners and be ecosystem protectors of forests — and stop putting money in the pockets of big corporations bent on destruction. Protect our precious mature and older forests and big trees on federal and private lands. Embrace solar, wind, and energy conservation — in ways that also protect our natural ecosystems that are our last best hope.

Marina Richie is a writer and author of the forthcoming book, "Halcyon Journey: in Search of the Belted Kingfisher."