



SALLY C. PIPES

OTHER VIEWS

## VA shows pitfalls of government health care

Some veterans are forced to wait months for appointments for treatment and care at VA facilities

In the fall of 2020, a patient in Augusta, Georgia went to the local Veterans Affairs medical center for a minimally invasive urologic surgery, according to a new report from the VA's Office of Inspector General.

Less than two weeks later, the OIG reports, he was dead. The Inspector General concluded that there had been "multiple deficiencies" in the patient's care. Among them, his doctor allegedly failed to account for his history of chest infections and alcoholism.

Sadly, this is just one of countless examples of the VA's failure to provide adequate care. And it shows why proposals to nationalize U.S. health care — like Senator Bernie Sanders's bill to establish Medicare for All, which he reintroduced in May — are bad news.

Every six months, the VA's Inspector General submits a report to Congress on the agency's performance. And every six months, the story is the same: gross incompetence, fraud, long wait times and substandard care.

The OIG's most recent report, which covered October 2021 to March 2022, identified more than \$4 billion in "monetary impact"

*EVEN PATIENTS NOT IN IMMINENT DANGER FACE THE STRESS OF ... LONG WAITS.*

— waste, questionable spending, fraud and the like. Investigations into offending behavior led to more than 100 arrests for crimes that included wire fraud and bribery. One Louisiana doctor had received more than \$650,000 in kickbacks from a medical supply company.

But while the waste and criminality are galling, the patient stories are worse.

A veteran who sought treatment and eventually died at a VA center in New Mexico waited 175 days for a CT scan for possible lung cancer, according to the OIG. Then, even though the results showed signs of cancer, the patient did not receive a follow-up biopsy. The patient eventually received a conclusive cancer diagnosis at a non-VA hospital.

The OIG also reported on a patient who died 17 days after being discharged from a VA medical center in Gainesville, Fla., after a 33-day hospital stay. The Inspector General concluded that the facility "failed to develop a discharge plan that adequately ensured patient safety and continuity of care."

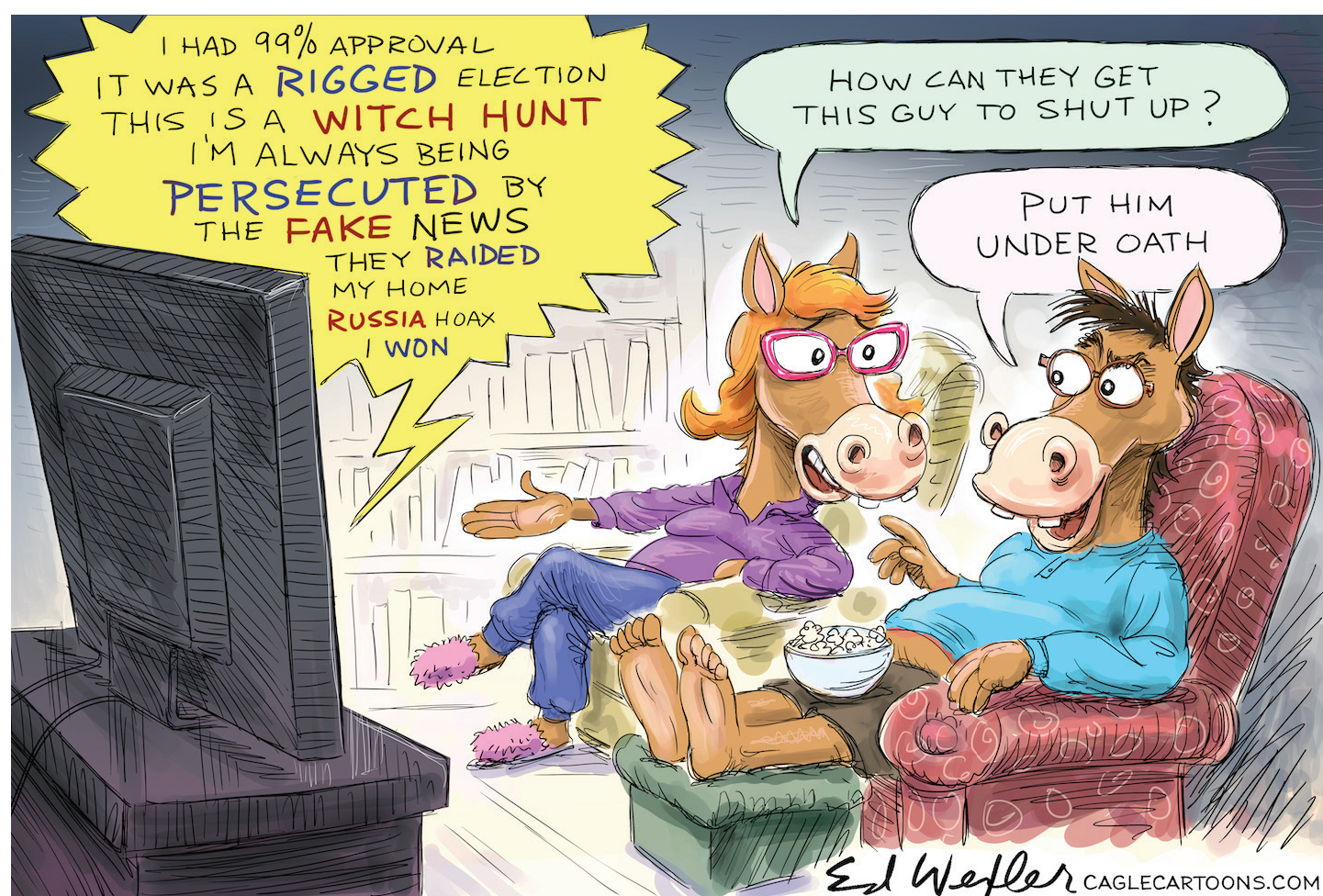
Even patients not in imminent danger face the stress of extremely long waits. At the VA clinic in Anaheim, California, at the beginning of June, new patients could expect to wait 29 days for an appointment. At the three clinics in Jacksonville, Florida, the average wait in early June was 52 days. And at one clinic in Fayetteville, North Carolina, earlier this month, it was 96 days.

None of this should be especially surprising. Long waits and sloppy care characterize single-payer health care all over the world.

Canadians face a median wait of more than 25 weeks for treatment from a specialist following referral by their general practitioner, according to the Fraser Institute, a Canadian think tank. Such delays have serious consequences. SecondStreet.org, another Canadian think tank, found that over 11,500 Canadian patients died while waiting for surgeries, procedures or diagnostic scans between 2020 and 2021.

Canada and the VA offer a glimpse of the subpar treatment, needless suffering and rampant fraud and abuse we can expect under Medicare for All.

Sally C. Pipes is president, CEO and Thomas W. Smith Fellow in Health Care Policy at the Pacific Research Institute.



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## New look, same mission for Hermiston schools



TRICIA MOONEY

OTHER VIEWS

The Hermiston School District has some very exciting things to celebrate this fall, and we have the entire Hermiston community to thank for it.

In 2019, Hermiston voters approved a bond to build two new elementary schools and add classroom space at the high school. This fall we will officially welcome students to Loma Vista Elementary School, the brand-new Rocky Heights Elementary School. These buildings give us not only more classroom space, but more secure and energy efficient buildings. They continue to create an equitable learning environment for all students and add permanent classroom space without cost-inefficient modulars. Work on the high school annex is under way and will continue throughout this school year.

Much of Hermiston's growth in the past few decades has been driven by young families. School districts in Oregon are funded based on enrollment to pay for things like teachers, transportation and facility maintenance. But

addressing capacity needs by adding new schools and buildings to keep up with that growth requires local financial support.

I count myself lucky to live and work in a community that understands investment in our schools and students is the

best way to ensure a brighter future for not just them, but for all of us.

Schools are such a fundamental part of life in Hermiston, and we're committed to making the most of these facilities. They are gathering places for community events, youth sports and extracurricular activities. I'm so grateful that residents are willing to support the youth by investing funds in these buildings and time attending these events.

We're also excited to launch the Amazon Web Services Think Big Space this fall near the Blue Mountain Community College campus in Hermiston. We've built our career technical education program into one of the best in the

state, and through this partnership with Amazon and BMCC we will add another layer of STEAM education.

The education experience is a time when students learn academic material, but also when they explore how they

want to apply their interests and skills in the real world. Programs like these open doorways for students to try things they haven't tried before and learn from experts in the field.

It's another step to preparing students for right-fit jobs, careers or post-high school education once they graduate.

Even though our buildings look different than a generation ago, our mission in the Hermiston School District has remained the same — to serve the needs of all students through rigorous and engaging program choices, mutual respect and high expectations.

Tricia Mooney is the superintendent of the Hermiston School District.

*THE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE IS A TIME WHEN STUDENTS LEARN ACADEMIC MATERIAL, BUT ALSO WHEN THEY EXPLORE HOW THEY WANT TO APPLY THEIR INTERESTS AND SKILLS IN THE REAL WORLD.*

## Making the 'People's House' safe



DICK HUGHES

OTHER VIEWS

The gold man atop the Oregon State Capitol has gone dark. A cavernous hole has arisen at the building base; another is on its way. The governor, secretary of state and state treasurer have been ousted from their offices. Guided tours of the Capitol are gone until 2025.

Those development are purposeful. Such is the price — a half-billion dollars plus a few years of temporary inconvenience — for finally making the "People's House" safe for the people.

The Capitol was in such sad shape seismically that in 2015, state Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, told my colleagues and me: "Given what we know, we should close the Capitol down today. At least we should protect kids from coming in," referring to school field trips.

There's more. The plumbing is so bad that the drinking fountains are unusable. The HVAC system could run hot in summer, cold in winter, with creaky ventilation. Parts of the building lacked fire sprinklers and other safety devices, including safe exits and sufficient staircases. The building was inhospitable to anyone using a wheelchair, scooter or stroller.

The first phases of the renovation and reconstruction corrected some deficiencies, especially in the 1977 legislative wings. The final, most expensive phase centers on the largest, oldest portion — the Capitol completed in 1938. So that work can be done, that area has been closed to the public, officeholders and legislative employees since July 1.

Staff have relocated. If you're looking for the governor's office, go to the nearby State Library across the Capitol Mall.

History buffs will recall that the previous capitol burned to the ground on

April 25, 1935. A young Mark Hatfield was among the Salem residents who came out to witness the inferno. Though long ago, that experience illustrates the relevance of the safety improvements underway.

The construction almost didn't happen and was delayed for years by bipartisan opposition. Courtney was the cheerleader for what in 2015 was a \$337 million project. At crunch time, House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, and House Majority Leader Val Hoyle, D-Eugene, said the seismic improvements were needed but the time wasn't right.

Joining them in voting "no," on a committee vote that effectively stopped the project from moving ahead, were Rep. Tobias Read, D-Beaverton; Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner; and Sen. Fred Girod, R-Lyons. Siding with Courtney were Rep. John Huffman, R-The Dalles, and Sen. Richard Devlin, D-Tualatin.

The price tag, uncertain public support and inconvenience bothered some lawmakers. During construction, the Legislature and other officials would have had to vacate the Capitol and use the renovated Public Utility Commission building — a former Sears store near the Capitol Mall — as their temporary capitol.

As a result, initial project staff were let go; \$25 million already had been spent.

Courtney was not happy: "When the magnitude 9 quake hits, the loss of life and property across our state will be tremendous. The decision not to complete this project ensures that those losses will include the Oregon State Capitol and the people inside it."

He persevered instead of knock-

ing heads to get his way that year. The Legislature embraced a much smaller, \$59.9 million project the next year as the first phase of the Capitol Accessibility, Maintenance and Safety project. The 2020 Legislature added phase

2 at \$70.8 million. With new leadership in the Oregon House this year and Courtney finishing his final term as Senate president, the 2022 Legislature approved the big phase 3: \$375 million.

Lawmakers are used to conducting meetings and public hearings virtually, so restricted access to committee

rooms no longer was an impediment. The construction schedule was reconfigured so the House and Senate could use their chambers during the legislative sessions. Work should wrap up in late 2025.

The big hole on the north side of the Capitol and one that will emerge farther west are so workers can get under the building, gut the lower level, hook up additional water and sewer lines, put in temporary shoring, remove the existing cement columns, and place new columns and devices to keep the structure stable during the quake.

As for the Oregon Pioneer atop the Capitol — colloquially known as the gold man — Capitol Accessibility, Maintenance and Safety director Jodie Jones told me that crews will seek a work-around to again illuminate the statue at night.

By the way, some Oregonians love the Capitol's design. Some despise it, complaining the top looks like a cake ornament or a bowling trophy. What say you?

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

### EDITOR'S NOTE

Do you have a point you'd like to make or an issue you feel strongly about? Submit a letter to the editor or a guest column.