

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Protecting medical consumers

Squabbling over health care in Congress is routine. But there is one issue where there is bipartisan support: protecting consumers from surprise medical bills.

Central and Eastern Oregon's congressman, Rep. Greg Walden, R-Hood River, deserves credit for leading a bipartisan bill with one possible solution that would bring consumers relief.

It's not hard to find a story of someone who received a surprise medical bill. There are some nightmarish tales. The plot is usually similar. Someone has a medical emergency, gets treatment and is surprised to learn the treatment is considered out-of-network and not covered or only partially covered by insurance. They get stuck with a big, unexpected medical bill. About 20% who are treated in an emergency room or admitted to a hospital end up being treated by a doctor who is not in network, according to some studies.

Walden has told the story of a mother, Sonji Wilkes, who testified before the Energy and Commerce Committee. Walden is the Republican leader of that committee. After her son was born, he had a medical issue. He was transferred to the neonatal intensive care unit 50 feet from where he was born. The hospital was in her network. But the hospital contracted out the intensive care unit and it was not. She ended up with a surprise bill for \$50,000.

The debate in Congress has been how to fix problems like this. The consensus seems to be that patients should not be billed for things insurance will not cover. So then how are medical providers and insurers supposed to agree on the price? Three variations are typically mentioned.

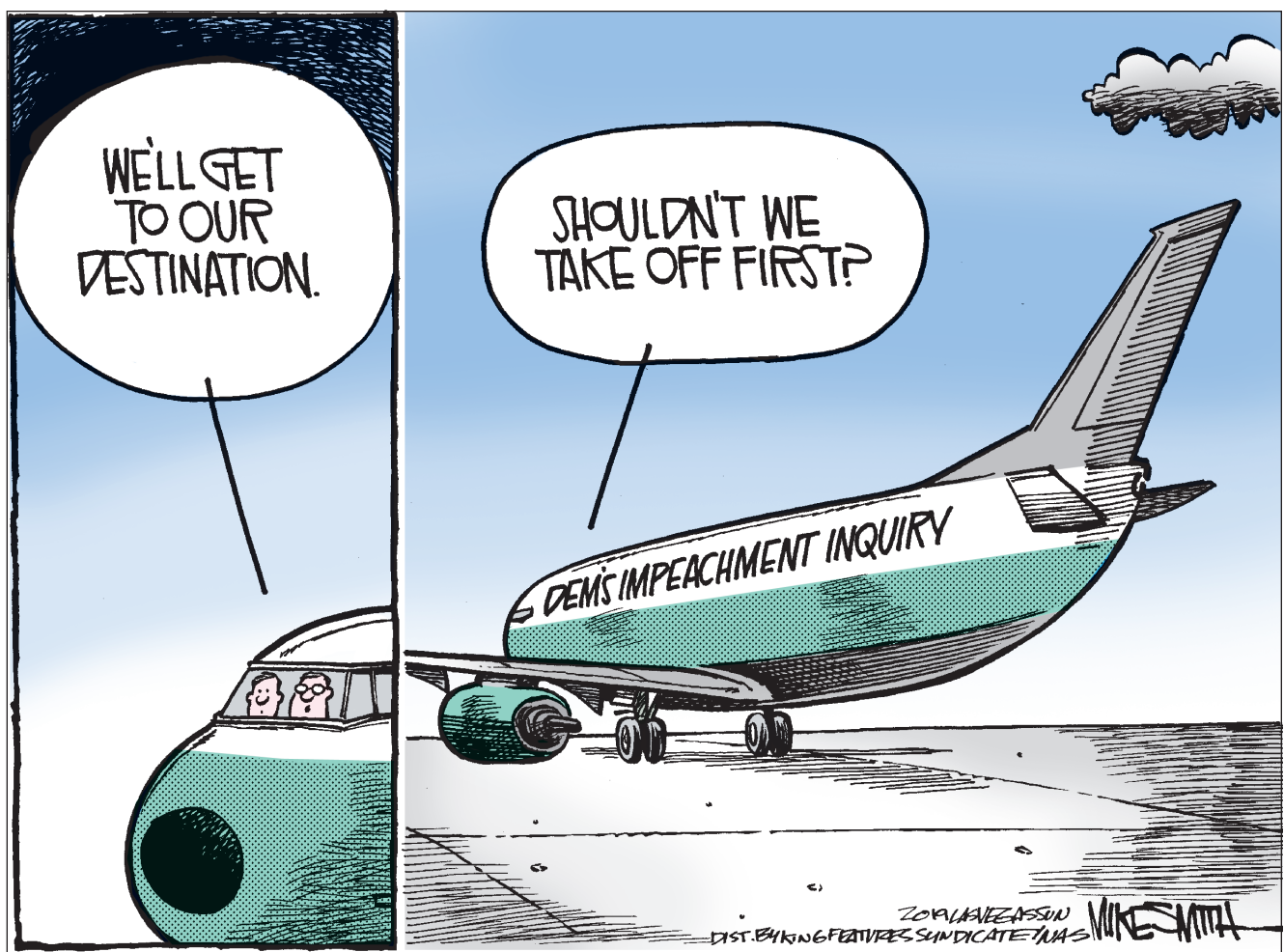
Should a fixed out-of-network price be imposed in some way? Some people don't like the idea of government price setting. In Walden's bill, though, the benchmark payment for out-of-network surprise bills would be — at least — the median in-network rate for the service in that region.

Should an arbitrator be used to settle disagreements over a set price? That has been criticized, because it may drag out the process and gives a lot of power to the arbitrator. It is the approach in Walden's bill — allowing parties to appeal a price. Should providers be compelled to sign contracts ahead of time — effectively guaranteeing that everything is in network? That is criticized because government would be forcing entities into contracts they may not want.

The Oregon Hospital Association wrote Walden earlier this year about his bill. One primary concern was that any rate setting done at a national level "would create disincentives for insurers and could not take into account all of the variabilities between individual markets to ensure adequate payment for large urban health system and independent critical access hospitals."

We can't say what approach is the right answer to best protect patients and also take into consideration the effects on providers and insurers. There may not be a perfect one. But Congress needs to implement a solution, and Walden should ensure the performance of that choice is tracked.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the Baker City Herald. Columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the Baker City Herald.



Newspapers adjusting to change

Change is in the air. It's not just the falling temperatures or the return of the school year. Within the walls of The Observer and Baker City Herald, the way we do business is being completely turned on its head. I'd forgotten just how hard — and rewarding — change can be. We should know. We're up to our necks in it.

I wrote a column a few months back describing to you the difficult final months of our newspaper operation under our former owners, Western Communications, and about our bright new future with the EO Media Group. Now, two months into the transition, there's more good news to share — and some explaining to do.

One of the first key initiatives after our purchase by the EO Media Group was to shepherd our newspapers out of the proverbial media dark ages and convert our operating systems. These changes affect every facet of our operation — and I mean EVERY — from the top down. Circulation and advertising systems, the upcoming launch of a new, easier-to-navigate and more dynamic website and e-edition, improvements to our social media platforms and so much more are all in the works right now.

It's been an overwhelming and exhausting process for the staff at both newspapers. There have been hours upon hours of training and troubleshooting. In the meantime, be patient with us and accept my advanced apology — if you call into the office and it sounds as though the department you're speaking with doesn't have a clue about what's going on or sounds overly flustered — that may indeed be the case. I'm half kidding of course, but for the next few weeks, the tasks and requests that were second nature to us will likely take us a few extra minutes. Once the dust settles, the end result will be better efficiencies in our office and a better experience for subscribers and advertisers.

It's not just change for the sake of change. The end goal is ultimately to serve you better.

On top of this chaos, The Observer



KARRINE BROGOITTI

is in the middle of a nationwide search for a new editor. You may recall the exit of our former editor, Cherise Kaechele, in March. At that time, there was far too much uncertainty and upheaval to bring in a new editor. In the meantime, our busy newsroom has been operating with oversight from our sports editor, Ronald Bond, and the invaluable assistance of Baker City's editor, Jayson Jacoby, and Andrew Cutler, editor of the East Oregonian and a former editor of The Observer.

Once the purchase of The Observer was finalized, seeking the right editor was one of the first orders of business that I and our regional publisher, Chris Rush, decided to tackle. I understand the importance of this position to any newspaper and the EO Media Group's commitment to award-winning community journalism. This valuable hire is an important first step to rebuilding our newsroom, improving our news coverage and re-establishing our place as the news leader in our communities.

This is not a hire that I'm willing to rush or that I take lightly. Our hard-working newsroom and our valued readers deserve the best that journalism has to offer, regardless of the size of our newspaper or the community it serves.

As I'm sure you've heard through the grapevine, or perhaps straight from the horse's mouth, The Observer office is going to be moving, and we are beginning to explore larger office space options for the Baker City Herald's operations. On any given day, we field several inquiries from customers who are curious about the progress of our relocations. Allow me to share what I can.

The truth is, The Observer's current location is just far more space than we need. With the removal of the press and the machinery responsible for inserting preprints, we are living in a quarter of the space available to us,

and we're anxious for a fresh start in a new home. Baker City's challenge is exactly the opposite — the current office is far too small for its needs and the configuration is less than ideal.

It's been an exhaustive search looking for potential office spaces for both locations. I went into this believing that finding the "perfect" locations to set up shop would be a pretty easy task. I was sadly mistaken.

Our business model is unique and we have very specific needs. Our functionality is much different than the average business office and I'm constantly looking for efficiencies to make what we do easier on staff and our customers. The way in which an office flows plays a big role in making that goal achievable. As with the hiring of an editor, choosing the next home for The Observer (and the Baker City Herald, in the future) is an important decision for myself and for our new company. There's a list of things that my employees deserve out of our new spaces and this is a chance to make those a reality. It's also an opportunity to make a statement to our readership about the health and vitality of our newspapers and the EO Media Group's commitment to investing in our future and our communities.

The Observer and Baker City Herald are taking full advantage of the new resources and tools being offered to us. I can happily report that — for the most part — you can teach an old dog new tricks. We are still overwhelmed, not with the worry and uncertainty for our future, but by the outpouring of support from you, the readers, and from the EO Media Group.

I'm being reminded daily of the growing pains that naturally come along with progress. And there will be plenty more to come in the next few months as we look ahead to other, exciting changes on the horizon.

Now, does anyone have an aspirin they can spare?

Karrine Brogoitti is the publisher for the Baker City Herald and The Observer in La Grande.

Letters to the editor

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the

accuracy of all statements in letters to the editor.

- Letters are limited to 350 words; longer letters will be edited for length. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.
- The writer must sign the letter and include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do

not include this information cannot be published.

- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.
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Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information

are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

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