Health authority's smear plans should outrage taxpayers

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 an 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 — especially 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 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."

The health authority already had raised eyebrows this year for its aggressive press releases about its dispute with FamilyCare, with which the health authority has been in litigation and mediation for 2 1/2 years.

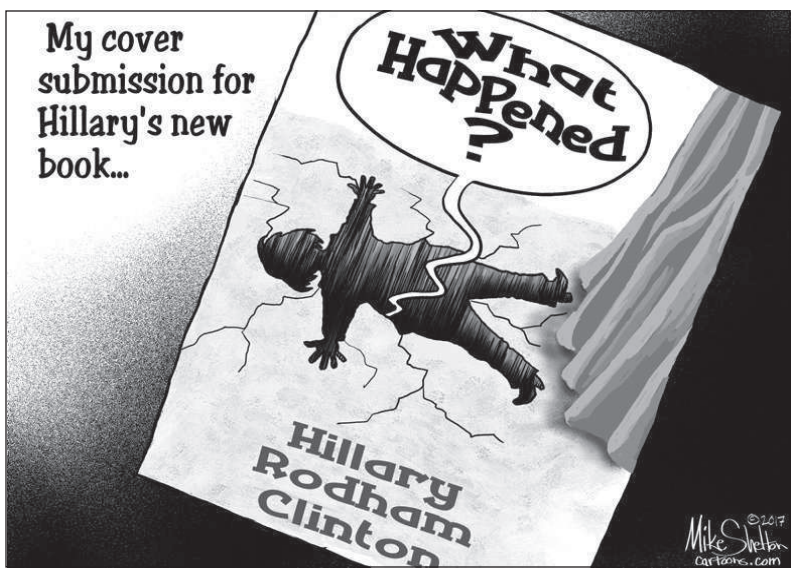
It's been a tough year for the state health department. This spring, Republican legislators criticized the health authority and the state Department of Environmental Quality for attempting "to push a misleading story line" regarding health and environmental concerns at Entek International in Lebanon. Legislators also were upset that the health authority 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.

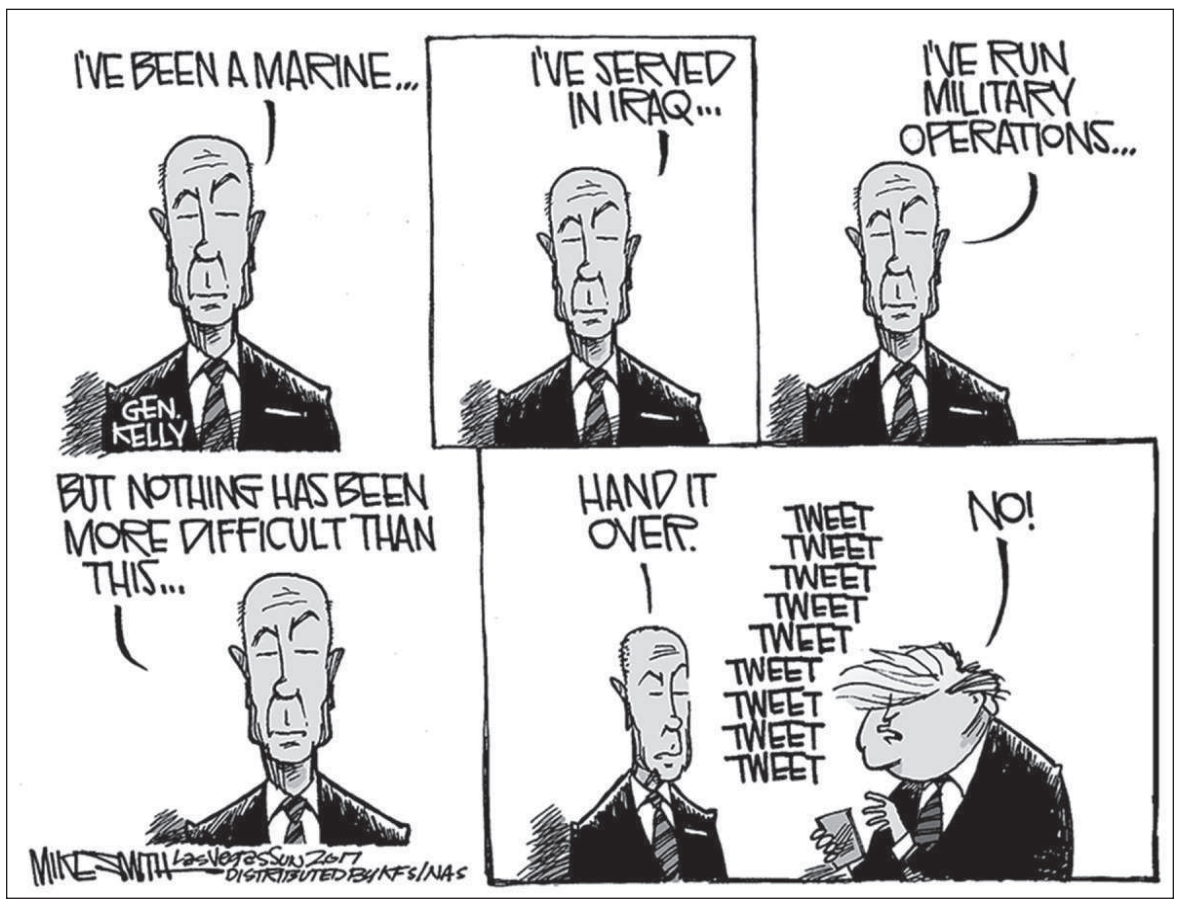
Against that backdrop, it's troubling that the state was slow to respond to last week's Tribune article.

Saxton told us that she would be sending a letter of apology to Oregon's coordinating care organizations, assuring them that the health authority 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 privilege.

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.

One leading Republican candidate for governor, Bend Rep. Knute Buehler, said the Oregon Health Authority's 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. Brown, should recognize that as well.





THE BACKROADS

A win-win-win-win

By Sean Hart
Blue Mountain Eagle

Sean Hart

It was nice to see some live music in town this weekend.

As a musician and music lover from a small town in Eastern Oregon, I've grown accustomed over the years to traveling to larger areas to see concerts — and being forced to spend my money outside of my community.

With the new venue in John Day, I can get my fix while supporting local business, with far less time and expense for travel. It's a win-win: for local patrons and the local economy.

While the Madden Brothers Performing Arts Center would never be able to host some of the larger shows I've attended — the Merle Haggards and Bob Dylans — the gym in the old junior high provides a suitable place for small-town entertainment.

The building that sat vacant for so many years now has new life. The Madden brothers fixed up the facade, and instead of a sign of decline, the performing arts center now stands as a community asset.

With the community benefit, I guess it's a win-win-win.

A fair number of community members came out for the first show Friday, and most seemed to be enjoying themselves.

The sound was good. The food was good. The musicians — Micky & the Motorcars and Dustin Schaefer — were good.

It really was a high-quality little show — not just for a small town deprived of ample opportunities to experience the arts.

But in an area like ours with few concerts outside of special events, a venue that can host such shows year-round will make it much easier to provide a splash of culture to local youth. Watching a live show is a far more fulfilling experience than listening to an iPod.

Maybe the next Bob Dylan or Merle Haggard is growing up in Grant County, just waiting for the inspiration to start their journey to the stage. And maybe they'll find it as the bass lines and guitar riffs permeate their bodies and the lyrics reverberate in their minds, their eyes fixed on the musicians making the magic that fills the room and echoes into the hallways.

I remember well the first shows I attended and would never have taken up music without the experience.

I guess that makes it a win-win-win-win when you add in the educational cultural enhancement.

This new venue has the possibility to bring a variety of benefits to Grant County, and I, for one, am grateful the Madden brothers are taking the risk to get it going.

Hopefully the community will support this endeavor to keep it going.

Sean Hart is the editor of the Blue Mountain Eagle.

FARMER'S FATE

Grandma's ketchup soup was a surprise

By Brianna Walker
To the Blue Mountain Eagle

Brianna Walker

I wasn't sure what I was expecting 17 years ago when I went on my first date with my husband. Dinner and a movie maybe? Flowers or candy? Maybe a peck on the cheek goodnight? What I did not expect was watching "The Sound of Music" — with his grandparents.

We drove to a tidy, little blue and white house — tulips and roses lining the sidewalk. Usually one has a little more time to prepare for "meeting the parents" or grandparents — like several months, maybe a year? As if a first date wasn't enough stress, now I had to try to make a good impression on three people.

His grandmother was worrying too — albeit for different reasons. She was concerned about us sitting idle in front of the TV for three hours. We had hardly made introductions before we were hustled in to the back room and given scissors and felts to cut out for a project she was working on. For three hours, we listened to Julie Andrews sing while we dutifully cut out felt animals and stacked them into piles.

The date, while unusual, unorthodox and productive, turned out to be enjoyable enough that one turned into two, then five, and before I knew it, his grandmother had invited me back for a birthday party.

The whole family turned out, a lovely dinner was set and then the guest of honor was pushed up to the head of the table — the family poodle. He had a nicely shaped can of dog food on a china plate, with carrots for candles. I guess the surprise showed on my face, because my future husband leaned over and whispered, "At least this year she didn't make everyone's food look like dog food!"

Going to her house became an adventure — and you could never predict what was going to happen. One evening we dropped by at supper time.

"Oh there's plenty of tomato soup," she said, scurrying to set two more bowls on the table. "Here, to make sure, we'll just add some ketchup and water, after all it's mostly tomatoes anyway, right?"

Ketchup soup? Mmm, wonder why this hasn't been picked up by a chain restaurant yet?

On a family camping trip, she accidentally threw out her can opener with the trash. After searching the whole trailer, my husband and I had given up and went hiking. Arriving back into the camp site, we found his grandmother near the dumpster — where she had organized a small group of other campers to help her look through the trash in hopes of finding her "very expensive" can opener. It eventually turned up in a bag of bananas in the camp trailer — no dumpster digging had been needed after all.

Several years after her husband had passed away, she was on another trip with us to the coast. She had been seeing a lot of an elderly gentleman, and spent the majority of our trip waving her cellphone around trying to find reception to call him. Many times through the day we would see her out on the beach standing on a big rock, her back to the wind and the phone pressed tightly to her ear. We had just finished a fresh batch of hot, homemade salsa when she came into the camp trailer from one of these calls.

"I have found myself a lover!" she announced, with a pleased expression.

Just for the record, hot salsa seems even hotter coming out your nose!

My husband's grandmother is turning 90 this month — and would still find sitting for a three-hour movie to be a waste of time, unless there was a project to be finished. Seventeen years ago, I had no idea that ketchup soup or dog birthday parties were in my future. It was an unusual first date, to meet an unusual woman, with unusual ideas, and who has influenced my life — unusually so.

Brianna Walker occasionally writes about the Farmer's Fate for the Blue Mountain Eagle.

WHERE TO WRITE

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Blue Mountain EAGLE
Published every Wednesday by EO Media Group

Grant County's Weekly Newspaper

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1 YEAR SUBSCRIPTION RATES
(including online access)
Grant County $40
Everywhere else in U.S. $51
Outside Continental U.S. $60
Subscriptions must be paid prior to delivery

Periodicals Postage Paid at John Day and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER
send address changes to:
Blue Mountain Eagle
195 N. Canyon Blvd.
John Day, OR 97845-1187

USPS 226-340

MEMBER OREGON NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION **Email: www.MyEagleNews.com Phone: 541-575-0710**
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