

Oregon's move to cap health care costs could have benefits and trade-offs

The cost of health care has been growing faster than wages and faster than the state economy. Some Oregonians cannot get the health care coverage they want or worry they can't afford going to the doctor.

There are numbers that back up those concerns. Deductibles in Oregon are the third highest in the nation, according to the Oregon Health Authority. And Oregon is fourth highest in the country for the percent of individuals with high out-of-pocket costs relative to their income.

Oregon is looking at doing what Delaware, Massachusetts and Rhode Island have done: put a cap on the increase in health care costs. A state committee is charged with coming up with a plan to present to the Oregon Legislature.

One real benefit could be the incentives the cap creates to change how providers are compensated for patient care. One real worry is the unintended consequences any reforms may create along the way.

The magic number for Oregon may well be 3.4% for 2021-25, and then 3% for 2026-30. That's how much costs would be allowed to go up. What happens if the cap breaks? Would it be enforced? Will quality of care suffer? Those are questions that need to be answered.

Massachusetts got off to a start with cost controls in 2012. Other states followed. So, did it work in Massachusetts? Costs did decline. For instance, that state stayed below a benchmark of a 3.6% increase in overall health care spending in 2013, 2016, 2017 and 2018. But if you look into the data a little deeper, there were also worri-

some trends. For instance, costs for consumers and patients rose more quickly in 2018. Individuals with private insurance had their out-of-pocket costs increase by 6.1% and premiums rose 5.2% from 2016-18, according to the Boston Globe. More residents also signed up for high-deductible plans.

Those changes should not be discounted. The theory has been if overall costs are controlled it will translate eventually into lower insurance costs for consumers. That logic is hard to argue with. But there do seem to be unintended consequences, such as cost-shifting to consumers. And if more people move to high-deductible plans, should that be considered victory?

SEIU Local 49 expressed concern at the committee's last meeting that health care workers will see their wages get squeezed as Oregon health care providers cut costs. The Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems said it was worried that because of the pandemic the state and providers may not have the money to quickly ramp up spending to do more data collection and analysis.

Surely, though, there is room in Oregon's health care system to save money and improve quality. There are too many perverse incentives driven by the fee-for-service model. It can drive providers to do more tests, for instance, because more tests mean more revenue. Instead, the committee wants Oregon to move in the direction of a payment model that bundles payments for treating groups of patients. That transformation may be the biggest benefit of Oregon's pursuit of a cap.



FARMER'S FATE

The fork theory meets my knife hypothesis



Brianna Walker

Nothing big. Nothing unusual — just a lot of little forks.

Although some of the forks stab a little deeper. Like finding one of the triplets of our mini-goat with a cold mouth. Warm baths, warm towels and a box near our bed, and within a couple days she was up. Then came scours. She combated that like a champ with an old home remedy using buttermilk and baking cocoa. Eventually she was back in the barn with her mom — only to be killed when a piece of plywood fell on her. That fork brought tears.

I used to take those metaphorical forks and use them to dig holes in which to bury garden seeds. I'd tell people that way I could bury my problems and eat them later — but over the years my garden has grown into the acre-size range. I need a new way to deal with forks.

As we head deeper into harvest season, our days are longer, our nights almost non-existent and our number of spoons each morning seems to decrease almost inversely proportional to our workload. Which means that at this rate we should be walking zombies by the end of the month — if it weren't for the knives.

I have come up with my own butter-knife hypothesis. Butter knives are used to spread butter or jam, honey or Nutella — things that are deliciously sweet and cover an object with delightful goodness. They pro-

vide salve to the fork wounds, and increase the reproductive life of spoons. And this month, while the forks were bombarding us, the knives seemed to ramp it up also.

My Flower Fairy (neighbor) dropped off an unexpected bouquet of her farm-fresh flowers on her way to market. Another friend dropped off a bottle of hair conditioner for my tangled summer tresses — simply because she'd seen me struggle to get a brush through my hair after a long day in the wind. Another friend invited me on a kayak adventure, and friends have provided my family meals the last several Saturdays, knowing our summers are so busy we don't spend much time cooking. Knives have also come in the form of dishes done by my 4-year-old, laundry done by my 11-year-old, a generous gift card from my boss and a couple of letters from dear friends.

You'll never put a better bit of butter on your knife than that of a kind or thoughtful gesture to a family member, friend or neighbor. I challenge you to take a stab at it this month. Smother someone's fork wounds with a little Nutella kindness. One never knows how many spoons a person has left for the day, or how many forks they've been stuck with — but you have an unlimited arsenal of knives at your disposal. Even if it's a bit out of your comfort zone — just remember, the Lord loveth a cheerful giver, but he also accepteth from a grouch!

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Register to vote, fill out census

To the Editor:

Citizens of Oregon House District 60 can do two things that will ensure that their voices are heard in Salem. First confirm you are registered to vote. Check your status at <https://secure.sos.state.or.us/orestar/vr/showVoterSearch.do?lang=eng&source=SOS>. If not registered to vote, submit your registration by Oct. 13, 2020. If submitting by mail it must be postmarked no later than Oct. 13. If registering online submit your registration no later than 11:59 p.m. on Oct. 13. Instructions for registering to vote may be found at <https://sos.oregon.gov/voting/Pages/registration.aspx?lang=en>. A link is included for registering with a voter registration form. If you have no access to the internet, contact your county clerk's office for instructions.

The second thing residents of District 60 can do is to fill out the 2020 Census form and submit it. You can find the information on reporting at <https://2020census.gov/en/ways-to-respond.html>. If you do not have access to the internet you have the option of completing the questionnaire by phone. To begin, call 844-330-2020. Federal dollars are allocated to counties based on current census information and amount to over \$3,000 per person per year for 10 years. Legislative districts are reconfigured every 10 years based on current census information. Legislative districts with smaller populations run the risk of being incorporated into larger districts if accurate census information is not available, which in turn weakens your voice in Salem. Grant County's response rate is far below the state average.

So, register to vote and fill out and turn in your census form.

Beth Spell
John Day

'Cronyism, nepotism and rascalism'

To the Editor:

In an election year, the civic minded thoroughly assess their government and, as per recommendations of old, replace it if it's rotten. Numerous commentaries lately in this section of the Eagle speak to that. While a crisis should bring out the best in local government, this pan-

democratic brought out the worst: selfishness over altruism, power grab over collaboration, exclusiveness over representation, secrecy over education.

Elsewhere, such has been described as government by "cronyism, nepotism and rascalism." Our county government freewheeled on taxpayer funds (rascalism), got friends (cronyism) and relatives (nepotism) into this green pipeline and got away with it (rascalism again).

The recent flurry of "good cop" reporting in the Eagle tries to balance out this well-deserved criticism, even though the heroics are based entirely on an accident of geography and involve out-of-state agencies (Smith murders), or are portents of a neglected, impoverished economy (drugs, domestic abuse), not an accident: The latter correlate positively. Even the myth of satanic cult cow mutilations found itself resurrected.

Of the three government undesirable, nepotism is surely the most despicable. Paying a county employee a living wage, a nice retirement, is good, and customary practice. Doubling that for one family when the job market is poor or non-existent takes that living wage, that nice retirement, away from a main provider, along with fostering elitism and a definite sense of entitlement which are self-propagating, non-transparent and tend to be permanent. On taxpayer funds.

Someone told me, "Nepotism is not illegal for counties." That does not make it right. It is not a democratic or, as I understand it, Christian, thing to do, and with 12 different denominations in a town of 1,700, the latter at least should be a factor.

Vega Nunez
Ritter

Editor's note: The Eagle does not try to "balance out" positive and negative stories. We report facts. Nepotism is illegal for counties in Oregon, but the restrictions do not apply to unpaid volunteers. Oregon law states public officials may not appoint, employ or promote a relative or member of the household to, or discharge, fire or demote a relative or member of the household from, a position with the public body that the public official serves or over which the public official exercises jurisdiction or control, unless the public official complies with conflict of interest requirements.

Lack of COVID-19 care concerning

To the Editor:

In regards to last week's front page article of large and serious criticism of Blue Mountain Hospital and clinic, I add my own enthusiastic amen!

A concern my wife and I have is the serious lack of capability of the local hospital and clinic in regards to in-depth COVID-19 care and treatment. In spite of the PR song and dance of local administrators, there is virtually no capability or intention of the local Blue Mountain Hospital to provide significant local care or treatment to locals who display obvious evidence of COVID-19 symptoms.

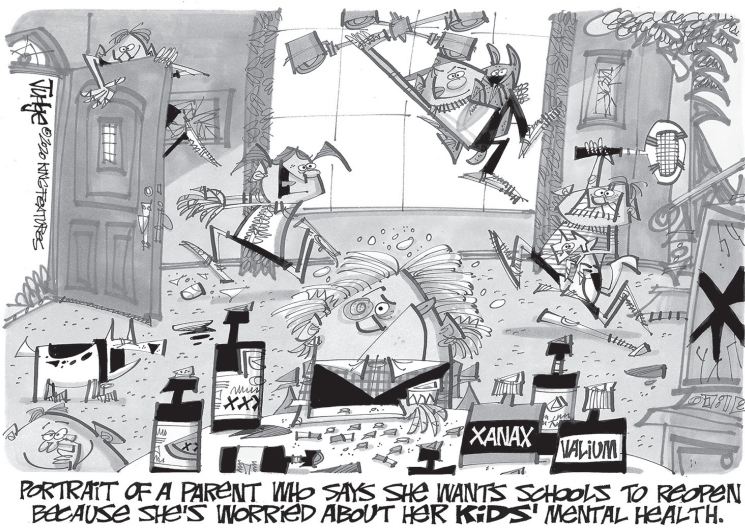
In their own words, in a recent Blue Mountain Eagle piece regarding their COVID-19 care capabilities, Rebekah Rand, director of Emergency Medical Services and emergency preparedness, said: "the hospital has three negative pressure rooms to contain the virus and that the hospital would air ambulance those who have been infected to Bend or elsewhere for more intensive care."

Put plainly, anyone showing up at the local Hospital with obvious COVID-19 symptoms will be sent to some facility far distant to this area — assuming that those distant facilities even have available space if they are having COVID-19 capacity problems of their own! Additionally, there aren't likely very many locals prepared to make the trip and an extended stay in support of a family loved one who is shuttled to a facility 150 or more miles away from this area — and many elderly are not capable of transportation, self care or treatment on their own.

Added to all the above, though this area has been spared the increases in infections seen in other parts of the state and nation, the reopening of local schools and approaching winter season will likely expose us all to a spike in COVID-19 cases that may well far exceed the intentions or capabilities of the local health care facilities.

The local hospital and clinic administrators we trust with our lives have been seriously slipping in their abilities and responsibilities to the John Day area they supposedly serve. Let's hope these recent events and concerns get the response they seriously deserve!

Gary Davidson
Canyon City



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