

Opinion

Furlough and the formulary

The ripple effects of the government shutdown reminded us that it isn't just government employees who are affected by financial uncertainty.

The same can be said for healthcare, and for drug formularies in particular. From air traffic controllers in metropolitan airports to park rangers in National Parks to restaurant employees in Washington, D.C. to family members and a broad spectrum of contractors, it did not matter. Hard work did not matter. Experience did not matter, neither did a PhD or an excellent attitude or affiliation with a political party. They were all hit with undeserved consequences.

What's the connection? A formulary is an approved list of drugs published by Pharmacy Benefit Managers (PBMs). A brief Kaiser Health News video (<https://khn.org/news/little-known-middlemen-save-money-on-medicines-but-maybe-not-for-you/>) illustrates the role PBMs have come to play as deciding intermediaries between pharmaceutical companies and health insurers. Drug formularies tend to come out with the new calendar year. The three largest PBMs are currently Cigna's Express Scripts (the result of a recent merger), CVS Caremark and OptumRx.

If you happen to take a medicine or use a prescribed delivery device or product which is excluded from the formulary it is like being placed on private furlough. It does not matter how hard you work to take care of yourself, or how excellent your overall health is, or if you have needed a medication for two years or twenty years. It does not matter if you have the same employer, health insurer and prescribing clinician as you did last year. The PBM blocks your access and lets you know that if you do not take



Katy Giebenhain

their preferred medication you are welcome to pay full price. Their preference might change next year if they contract with a different pharmaceutical company. Sometimes this does not matter. A generic drug or another brand might function well for you. If it does not, tough. You can pay for it as if you had no insurance at all. And next year, when new formularies come out, you can wait and see if the medication switches again.

As with the government shutdown, those indirectly affected share the exasperation and sometimes danger. When your child or parent or anyone you are responsible for and care about needs a medication you are also on the hook. Your daily life changes with theirs.

We're starting to hear more about the exponentially high price of prescription drugs but we rarely hear about other barriers to access. Generics are extremely important, and there is a long haul ahead on the patent protectionism front with pharmaceutical companies and the shareholder-driven decision making of PBMs to get pricing under control. Access is also about getting the right drug or device a patient needs at the right time, in the right dosage.

Last week I was in conversation with a colleague who does not know

how she will afford an essential medication because the PBM her insurer contracts with decided that it will only provide the generic even though she does not respond to it in the same way. Bodies are not identical. Generic drugs have the same active ingredients as name brand drugs and they work well in many cases, but not in all cases. Absorption rates vary. The functions of delivery devices vary. Her specialist is just as frustrated as she is because the decision should be theirs, not the PBM who used to cover the drug and then excluded it.

This is not simply a patient problem. The expertise of clinicians is undermined when they no longer get to decide what to prescribe for their patients. "The Insulin Wars," a January 20, 2019 New York Times article by Danielle Ofri, a physician at Bellevue Hospital is an excellent example of how this hinders the very people who are trained to make these decisions.

"Sick" and "healthy" are not tidy categories. We all age. We move in and out of categories. Those for whom we are financially responsible age. They get injured. They get cancer. They get Hepatitis C or Multiple Sclerosis. They get Crohn's Disease. They get cancer again. They need EpiPens or antiviral drugs or continuous glucose monitors.

We will all be hearing more about drug pricing and patents and legislation to start changing what has long been a blind spot. It is an issue of collective urgency. It should be the least partisan issue of our time. The sooner we treat it this way the quicker we will begin to improve it.

Katy Giebenhain is a member of the Gettysburg Area Democracy for America Healthcare Task Force.

As Our Readers See It

Change school funding

Editor, *Gettysburg Times*,

The original sin was to vest in 500 Pennsylvania school boards the power to tax property. School property taxes soared. School boards never looked back.

Then came Act 1 in an attempt to put the brakes on the school boards' fleecing of property owners. But school boards soon learned how to cook the books to make it look like revenue deficits were caused by things that would allow Act 1 exemptions. As a result, almost no request to exceed Act 1 limits was denied by Harrisburg. The fleecing continued. Now boards say we should be "happy" when their yearly tax increases don't need an Act 1 exemption!

Over the past 20 years Pennsylvania's school property taxes have increased 2½ times faster than the regional CPI and twice as fast as Pennsylvania's average weekly wage. Meanwhile, student scores on SAT's have actually gone down. Nevertheless, the school boards continue to build "Taj Mahal" schools and professional-quality sports facilities. And every year, across the Commonwealth, 10,000 homes are seized for inability to pay school property taxes.

Who are these school board members that don't care if you lose your home in their service? As you might expect, they are almost exclusively

former teachers and school administrators with little to no real business experience. And, as you also might expect, their motivations are to extract the greatest possible funding for their educational "needs;" as they see them, not as you may see them.

Why are there not more taxpayer-friendly school board members? Because when fiscal conservatives run they are vilified by the school unions. The voters that bother to vote for board members tend to have students in the school system or some other school-related bias. Voter apathy drives a final stake through the heart of any conservative challenge.

There is but one solution: school boards must be liberated from their grip on taxation. School funding must be changed to broader-based, statewide revenue sources such as sales and income taxes—all would pay a fair share, and school revenue would even come from non-Pennsylvanians who visit and shop here. This is what Senate and House Bills 76 seek to accomplish. School districts would then have to live within a real budget, just as you and I must do. Let's make sure our representatives in Harrisburg understand this and make it one of their highest priorities. Visit www.ptcc.us to learn more.

Bob Stillwell,
Gettysburg

Ridicule, the last great death of a culture

A few words about the Trail of Tears and other jokes.

Granted, the Trail of Tears would hardly seem a laughing matter. To the contrary, as recounted by History.com, it was an ordeal of robbery, mass relocation and death growing out of what white Americans of the 19th century saw as their "Indian problem." By which they meant that American Indians held lands in the southeast United States — including parts of North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Florida — that white people coveted.

They tried various schemes to get it. They tried "civilizing" the Indians — requiring them to learn English, accept European concepts of property rights, convert to Christianity. They tried looting, terrorism and mass murder. Beginning in 1830, they tried The Indian Removal Act. It allowed for Native Americans to be forcibly resettled to the West, pushed out of white people's way exactly as a bulldozer pushes debris.

Prodded by the U.S. Army, Native Americans made the journey on foot, walking over a thousand miles, sometimes in chains. Epidemics of whooping cough, typhus, cholera and dysentery ravaged them. Many starved, and thousands died before the remnant reached the land the federal government said was now theirs.

Eventually, white people took that, too. It became the state of Oklahoma.

The Cherokee dubbed the walk "The Trail Where We Cried." And no, you wouldn't think there was anything funny about it, but the Donalds Trump would disagree.

On Saturday, Trump the elder tweeted a job at senator and presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren, referencing her claim of Native-American ancestry: "See you on the campaign TRAIL, Liz!" Then his son Donald Jr. tweeted a screenshot of his father's tweet along with this response from another Twitter user: "The Native American genocide continues with another murder by the president."

"Savage!!!" exulted Don-Boy. "Love my president!"

Have you slapped your knee yet? Not that this blithe disrespect is

unique. To the contrary, in the ridicule of these two rich twits, one hears an echo of school kids mocking a Native-American elder chanting a prayer song on the National Mall. For that matter, one spies a white medical student in blackface standing by a classmate in a Ku Klux Klan hood.

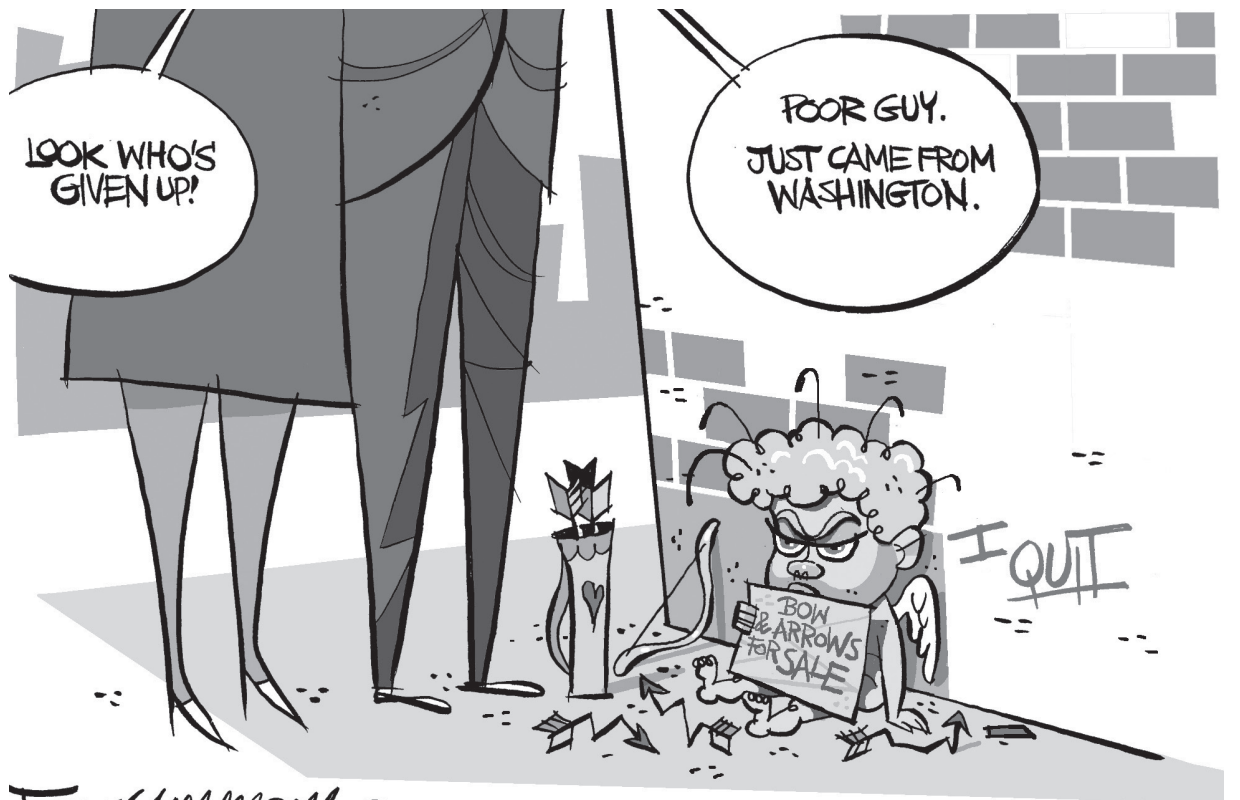
And one hears too many white people laughing under the delusion that these things are jokes. It is ridicule as barrier to knowing or feeling, as all-purpose defense against claims on conscience. And never mind that when you laugh at someone else's traumas and passages, you diminish them. You exile them from empathy.

Ridicule, you see, is the last great death of a culture. The first comes when trauma is inflicted upon a people, killing the lives they once knew. The second comes when that trauma is broadly forgotten, when it is turned into myths and John Wayne movies, killing the memory of who they were and what happened to them. The third is when a people and their traumas are reduced to punchlines, killing their humanity and making them absurd.

These processes operated long before Donald Trump arrived. But under him, they have gained the imprimatur of presidential approval. He has made arrogant disregard for the passages and lives of people other than white ones OK again. This is the true state of our Union. And people of color and people of conscience should be appalled that it is now necessary to say what was obvious not so very long ago: The Trail Where We Cried is sacred. Show some respect.

Leonard Pitts is a columnist for *The Miami Herald*, 1 Herald Plaza, Miami, Fla., 33132.

Leonard Pitts



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TODAY IN HISTORY

By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 14, the 45th day of 2019. There are 320 days left in the year. This is Valentine's Day.

Today's Highlights in History:
On Feb. 14, 2018, a gunman identified as a former student opened fire with a semi-automatic rifle at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School near Fort Lauderdale, Florida, killing 17 people in the nation's deadliest school shooting since the attack in Newtown, Connecticut, more than five years earlier.

On this date:
In 1663, New France (Canada) became a royal province under King Louis XIV.

In 1859, Oregon was admitted to the Union as the 33rd state.

In 1903, the Department of Commerce and Labor was established. (It was divided into separate departments of Commerce and Labor in 1913.)

In 1912, Arizona became the 48th state of the Union as President William Howard Taft signed a proclamation.

In 1913, labor leader Jimmy Hoffa was born in Brazil, Ind.; college football coach Woody Hayes was born in Clifton, Ohio; sports broadcaster Mel Allen was born in Birmingham, Ala.
In 1929, the "St. Valentine's Day Massacre" took place in a Chicago garage as seven rivals of Al Capone's gang were gunned down.

In 1949, Israel's Knesset convened for the first time.

In 1876, inventors Alexander Graham Bell and Elisha Gray applied separately for patents related to the telephone. (The U.S. Supreme Court eventually ruled Bell the rightful inventor.)

In 1979, Adolph Dubs, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, was kidnapped in Kabul by Muslim extremists and killed in a shootout between

his abductors and police.

In 1984, 6-year-old Stormie Jones became the world's first heart-liver transplant recipient at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh (she lived until November, 1990).

In 2013, double-amputee and Olympic sprinter Oscar Pistorius shot and killed his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp, at his home in Pretoria, South Africa; he was later convicted of murder and is serving a 13-year prison term. American Airlines and US Airways announced an \$11 billion merger that turned American into the world's biggest airline.

In 2017, a former store clerk was convicted in New York of murder in one of the nation's most haunting missing-child cases, nearly 38 years after 6-year-old Etan Patz (AY'-tahn pays) disappeared while on the way to a school bus stop.

Ten years ago: Savoring his first big victory in Congress, President Barack Obama used his weekly radio and Internet address to celebrate the just-passed \$787 billion economic stimulus bill as a "major milestone on our road to recovery." Jazz drummer Louie Bellson, who'd performed with Duke Ellington and Bellson's late wife, Pearl Bailey, died in Los Angeles at age 84.

Five years ago: Drawing a link between climate change and California's drought, President Barack Obama said the U.S. had to stop thinking of water as a "zero-sum" game and needed to do a better job of figuring out how to make sure everyone's water needs were satisfied. An attempt by the United Auto Workers to organize employees at a Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, fell short in a 712-626 vote. Jim Fregosi, a former All-Star who'd won more than 1,000 games as a manager for four teams, died in Miami at age 71.

One year ago: Stormy Daniels' manager said the porn star now

believed she was free to discuss what she said was a sexual encounter with Donald Trump; she believed that Trump lawyer Michael Cohen had invalidated a non-disclosure agreement. After initially appearing to cast doubt on allegations that former aide Rob Porter had abused two ex-wives, Trump declared that he was "totally opposed to domestic violence." South African president Jacob Zuma, whose tenure had been marked by scandals, resigned after being ordered to do so by his party, the African National Congress.

Today's Birthdays: TV personality Hugh Downs is 98. Actor Andrew Prine is 83. Country singer Razy Bailey is 80. Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg is 77. Jazz musician Maceo Parker is 76. Movie director Alan Parker is 75. Journalist Carl Bernstein is 75. Former Sen. Judd Gregg, R-N.H., is 72. TV personality Pat O'Brien is 71. Magician Teller (Penn and Teller) is 71. Cajun singer-musician Michael Doucet (doo-SAY') (Beausoleil) is 68. Actor Ken Wahl is 62. Opera singer Renee Fleming is 60. Actress Meg Tilly is 59. Pro Football Hall of Famer Jim Kelly is 59. Singer-producer Dwayne Wiggins is 58. Actress Sakina Jaffee is 57. Actor Enrico Colantoni is 56. Actor Zach Galligan is 55. Actor Valente Rodriguez is 55. Rock musician Ricky Wolkung (The Nixons) is 53. Former tennis player Manuela Maleeva is 52. Actor Simon Pegg is 49. Rock musician Kevin Bales (Lit) is 47. Rock singer Rob Thomas (Matchbox Twenty) is 47. Former NFL quarterback Drew Bledsoe is 47. Actress Danai Gurira is 41. Actor Matt Barr is 35. Actress Stephanie Leonidas is 35. Actor Jake Lacy is 33. Actress Tiffany Thornton is 33. Actor Brett Dier is 29. Actor Freddie Highmore is 27.

Thought for Today: "To find a man's true character, play golf with him." — P.G. Wodehouse (1881-1975).

Share your thoughts!

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