

SB 631 Hearing--Written Testimony  
Senate Health Care Committee Hearing 4 May 2015  
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I am writing in strong support of the Senate passing SB 631 to assure that every Oregonian has the health care he or she needs to live a healthy, productive life.

In our current system too many of us are not able to access prevention or treatment when we need it at a cost that we are able to pay. If you do not have health insurance at all, you hope for the best and when the worst happens you go to the Emergency Room. The bill will be high. If you cannot pay it, you go into debt; and if you still cannot pay it, you very often end up in medical bankruptcy.

Even if you have health insurance, the deductible may be so high that you do not go to a doctor when you should because you do not have the money to pay out of pocket. You are weighing: doctor vs food on the table? doctor vs heat in the winter? doctor vs a car to get to work? The doctor too often loses out in these calculations and what was a small problem escalates to become a big one. The original problem will have become even more expensive to treat and the cycle begins again.

I am a hospice chaplain serving in the Portland metro area. I have been a hospital chaplain for 15 years and have witnessed the struggles of all but my wealthiest patients over the issue of the cost of their health care. I heard about a patient in Oregon once who had excruciating tooth pain and needed 2 teeth removed. Oral surgery was not covered by her insurance and when she could not find some one to help her, she could stand the pain no longer and pulled the teeth herself with a pair of pliers. Then she had potential infection to treat and the possibility that not all of the roots were removed and an oral surgeon would still be needed. Not only would the cost very likely be higher in this new scenario, but the pain and suffering of the patient is impossible to quantify. She suffered for over 2 weeks before taking this rather extreme action which reminds me of the 19th century or countries in the undeveloped world. But this is the United States of America! How can this happen?

It happens more than you will ever hear about. People are often reluctant to tell their stories out of shame and fear of judgment by those who do not understand the limits of those with limited income. This patient's anonymity must be protected, but the essence of her story can be repeated hundreds, no thousands of times. Just change the players, change the illness or injury, but repeat the same outcome.

These experiences are almost unheard of in other developed countries of the world who have universal, affordable health care for everyone who lives there. They are appalled and amazed to hear the experience of someone like this patient. They cannot understand why there will routinely be over 1,000 people standing in line for hours to attend a free health clinic held in a sports arena staffed by volunteer clinicians. How can this happen in the richest country in the world?

It can only because we allow it to happen. And together we can change that. Please consider the merits of this bill. Listen to your constituents with an open mind and heart and learn about their suffering. Accept your privileged and fortunate position to actually do something to make their lives better. We will all be ever grateful and your legislative session will go down in history and be applauded by every Oregonian for years to come.

Thank you.