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## **MY VOICE: Health care in an era of Trump**

Letter to *The Observer*

by Bill Whitaker, LaGrande

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This morning, sitting in the waiting area of the Grande Ronde Hospital's Fourth Street Clinic, I watched a steady stream of my Union County neighbors — farmers and ranchers, children and elders, bodies stooped by years of hard work, bodies strong and young — as they waited to receive the medical care they needed. The clerical and medical staff responded cheerfully and professionally to their needs.

I couldn't help but reflect how fortunate I am to have my health care paid for by Medicare and to be able to afford supplemental insurance that pays for most costs that Medicare doesn't cover. Many of the families with children, I supposed, had low or moderate income and were covered by Medicaid through the Oregon Health Plan. Others were receiving government subsidies for coverage under the Affordable Care Act. The neighbors I saw were getting the care they needed.

Our hospitals also benefit from publicly funded health care. According to a recent Lund Report, "Medicare and Medicaid add up to more than two-thirds of hospital charges" in recent studies.

Now we have elected a new administration that promises to repeal the ACA with little idea about how to protect the working and middle class people who depend on it. In addition, congressional Republicans plan to privatize Medicare, block grants and gut Medicaid (dramatically impacting the Oregon Health Plan), while providing massive tax breaks to America's richest 1 percent.

I wonder what it will be like to sit in our clinic waiting room if Republican plans are implemented? How many of our neighbors will no longer be able to access the health care they need? How many people will die in Eastern Oregon each year because they cannot get health care? How many spaghetti suppers and car washes will we see as friends try in vain to pay for their neighbor's health care needs? How many jars will sit on checkout counters begging for money to support this or that health care emergency?

The ACA isn't perfect — for many families (even with government subsidies), insurance premiums, co-pays and high deductibles mean that they have, at best, catastrophic coverage. The ACA did bring important changes, though. Insurance can no longer be denied because of "pre-existing conditions." Women cannot be charged higher rates than men. Children can remain on their parents' policies until they are 26. Basic preventative services are free.

The uninsured rate in Eastern Oregon dropped dramatically between 2013 and 2015 when major coverage provisions of the ACA took effect. In Union County in 2013, 20 percent of our neighbors lacked health insurance. This dropped to 11 percent in 2015. In Wallowa County, the uninsured rate decreased from 21 percent in 2013 to 9 percent in 2015. Similar decreases were seen in Malheur, Baker and Umatilla counties. Although having insurance does not necessarily mean having access to health care — far too many neighbors still cannot afford their deductibles and co-pays — the ACA brings significant relief to many Eastern Oregonians.

According to the Urban Institute, 29 million Americans will lose health insurance coverage if the ACA is repealed. A Harvard Medical School study says repealing the ACA will kill more than 43,000 Americans each year. What do we face in Eastern Oregon?

The threat of Trumpism to our health care is real. Rather than repeal the ACA, we should replace it with HR 676 — The Expanded and Improved Medicare for All Act that has been reintroduced in the current session of Congress with 50 co-signers.

HR 676 is the best way to provide excellent, affordable health care to all Americans. Eventually, universal, publicly funded health care will be the solution. No alternative is affordable.

In the meantime, we need to be vigilant against mislabeled and misleading attempts to destroy the Affordable Care Act, Medicaid and Medicare.

The Democratic Party of Union County, Union County Progressives, Oregon Rural Action and many others are organizing resistance to protect our health care. Information on how you can join these efforts is on their Facebook pages. I, for one, will resist. I plan to give up my Medicare card only when they peel my cold dead fingers from around it.