

Obamacare's individual mandate establishes principle of universality

Last October, a widely-ballyhooed story told of a Tennessee family which lost its home while the fire department did nothing but prevent the fire from spreading to nearby homes. Those homes had paid the \$75 fire protection fee. The father claimed he "forgot."

Recently, in Mexico, we had dinner with a very nice couple. During that time, the woman talked about her father, a wealthy retired doctor who was living in a nursing home. Out of curiosity, I asked how they financed the cost and she said Medicaid (the program for poor people) was paying for most of it. "He just didn't ever save much."

Several years ago, my cousin's son had appendicitis, went to the hospital emergency room and had an emergency appendectomy. Because he had no health insurance and no significant income, he paid nothing.

I have paid \$300 to \$2,000 a year in homeowners insurance and \$500 to \$700 in motor vehicle insurance for each of the past 20 years without ever making a single claim. I know it's a good deal – I am happy to pay it – because it protects me from the catastrophic cost of damage to my home or harm to others in an automobile accident.

What all these stories have in common is the reason why the new health care bill (a.k.a. "Obamacare") contains an "individual mandate" by which individuals who do not get health insurance pay a penalty. Critics call it a "tax." "Universal fee" would be a better word.

I have no sympathy for the Tennessee homeowner unless irresponsibility and stupidity merit sympathy. I doubt he "forgot." I'll bet he consciously decided not to pay it. Indeed, the father is quoted as saying, "I thought they'd come out and put it out, even if you hadn't paid your \$75."

This is why states require car owners to buy both liability and personal protection insurance. The first is for accidents you cause. The second is for yourself in case you get in an accident caused by another person breaking the law by not carrying liability insurance.

Universal health care is based on the same principle as universal car insurance. Without universality, the cost of medical care for the person without insurance falls on the taxpayer and the insured.

In our society, even without a universal health care system – or rather, even with a very inefficient, messy one – every hospital that receives public money (most all hospitals) must provide emergency care. In Eastern Oregon that means everywhere from Pioneer Memorial Hospital in Heppner to St. Alphonsus Medical Center in Baker City to Blue Mountain Hospital in John Day.

My cousin's son's case is why the new health care law allows families to include in their policies children up to age 26. Young people are notorious for not having much money and thinking they are invulnerable. In this case, my cousin paid the hospital foundation the amount his son's surgery cost but few would do that.

The fundamental principal of all insurance is shared responsibility. I am happy to pay for insurance on which I never collect because doing so relieves me of the fear of losing everything in a catastrophe. It's a core principle of community: the lucky cover the unlucky -- and if they are smart, thank their stars either way.

The Tennessee homeowner and the rich doctor gamed the system at our expense. Universality trumps the game.

Universality is even more important now because of high unemployment. Those who once were employed with health insurance are falling into Medicaid.

Republican House Budget Committee Chair Paul Ryan's solution is "free markets" and "block grants" intended to decimate Medicare (the program for the over-65) as well as Medicaid.

Ironically, such attacks on Obamacare will not fail, as they will against Medicare, because it's popular.

They will fail because politically powerful insurers lust after the income from individual mandates on the healthy in trade for the insurers' agreement to such costly but politically popular requirements as accepting people with "pre-existing conditions."

A single, uniform, per-capita fee to cover health insurance for everyone would be a lot more efficient but the individual mandate at least establishes the principle of universality.