

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

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EDITORIAL

Parking fees are healthy

Hospital charges help cover cost of providing service

Canada's top medical journal has raised the important issue of hospital parking, and the stress this causes patients, but it's an ailment with no easy cure.

The Canadian Medical Association Journal's latest editorial calls for scraping paid parking at hospitals. Editor-in-chief Rajendra Kale argues the charge is "a user fee in disguise" and a barrier to health-care services that flouts the Canada Health Act. He believes Canada should follow the lead of the National Health Services hospitals in Wales and Scotland, which abolished parking fees in 2008.

The editorial quotes Nicola Sturgeon, the Scottish cabinet secretary for health at the time, who said: "It's simply not fair to expect patients or visitors to have to pay when they come to hospital, when they may be suffering personal anxiety, stress or grief. Put bluntly, a car parking charge is often the last thing people need."

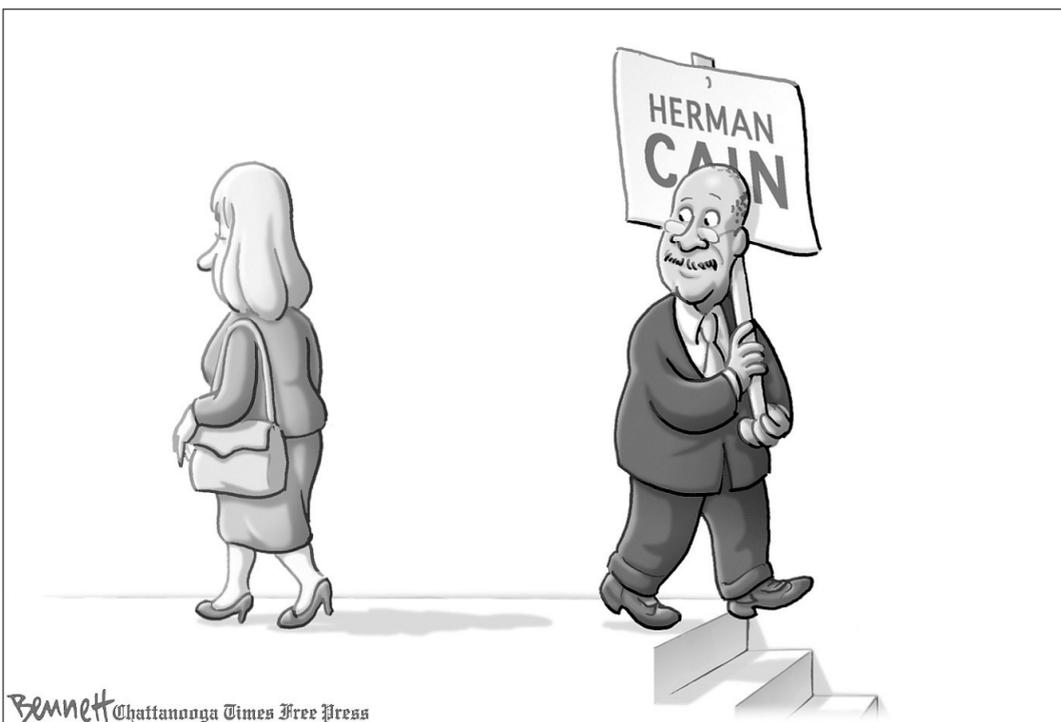
This may be true, but eliminating parking fees is a rather utopian notion, for it fails to account for the reality of the escalating costs of health care. There is a serious and growing cash crunch facing our hospitals, which are often located on prime real estate. Charging for parking is a small way of recouping some of the high operating costs. In the grand scheme of a hospital's budget, revenue from parking might be a tiny percentage, but it is no chump change, and in Alberta, parking revenue is used to assist with the operating costs of the service. Revenue is directed into the maintenance

costs of hospital parking, including construction of new parkades, repairs, staffing, cleaning and snow removal. Alberta Health Services collected \$47 million from parking facilities provincewide last year, and expects to collect \$55 million this fiscal year. Meanwhile, the operating costs for parking at Alberta hospitals is budgeted at \$60 million.

Alberta can do more to ease the burden of parking on those who visit our hospitals, either as outpatients or visitors of patients occupying beds. Some ideas include increasing the amount of disability parking conveniently located near the entrance. Those with disability decals might even park for free. Or patients admitted to hospital could perhaps add one or two names to a visitor list, which might then be eligible for free or discounted parking permits.

The medical journal suggests a volunteer-run valet service. That's a fantastic idea that would at least remove the burden of finding parking when rushing to an appointment. And finding a parking spot is especially difficult for the elderly and the ill, who are increasingly receiving treatment as outpatients.

The medical journal has shone the light on the important matter of hospital parking. Although Health Minister Fred Horne has ruled out free parking, the issue deserves to be reviewed with the intention of bringing in more patient-friendly policies without shifting the cost to an already stretched health-care system.



Tougher drinking laws won't put cork in night out



PAULA ARAB

In the newspaper business, journalists often find themselves in unusual circumstances. The lengths I've gone to for "the story" include jumping out of a Cessna for a skydiving assignment and getting ropelifted into an aging Canadian Air Forces chopper during a routine search and rescue exercise, deep in the Ontario forest. I've chased tornadoes and politicians, driven a race car, cycled with Lance Armstrong, and once trespassed onto a federal prison during a riot.

But getting drunk on the job? I thought that was the stuff of Hollywood films and the fictitious Lou Grant, the quintessential hard-nosed, heavy-drinking newspaperman. That was until last week, when I found myself on a "drinking date" with Const. Rob Haffner of the Calgary Police Service traffic unit. I drank and he tested my blood-alcohol content.

The results were shocking. Like most who have read about Alberta's new drinking and driving legislation, I feared the end of even one glass of wine with dinner out. Bill 26 gives police tougher roadside power to penalize drivers who blow between .05 and .08, which isn't even a Criminal Code violation. Police can now impose a 24-hour li-



Gavin Young, Calgary Herald

Columnist Paula Arab, who had her blood-alcohol content tested by Const. Rob Haffner as part of an experiment, was able to consume one alcoholic beverage per hour without topping proposed new drinking limits.

cence suspension. The new legislation increases that to an automatic three-day suspension and a three-day vehicle seizure for a first offence. The penalties escalate with repeat offences.

The new magic number, it seems, is .05. Just how much alcohol is that, I wondered, especially for someone my size, five foot one and 115 pounds? I decided to find out. My partner, Ashley Hughes, who is six foot one and weighs 165 pounds, came along. We had a "typical" night out of after-work drinks and a bite to eat at Stolo's Pizza and Sports Bar, a watering hole near the police station.

First, we had to get there. Good luck getting a taxi during evening rush hour. I started phoning just after 4 p.m. It took 15 minutes to put in my order, another 20 to 25 minutes for the cab to arrive, and then he left in the time it took me to get downstairs. So far, so typical.

By 4:50 p.m., we were on our way.

At 5:15 p.m., I ordered a seven-ounce glass of cheap white wine, and Ashley had a Heineken. We played a few games of pool and enjoyed our drinks over the next hour. After one glass of wine on an empty stomach, I felt light-headed. I would never have gotten behind the wheel when Haffner took me out to his police cruiser in the parking lot, and asked me to blow.

Feeling tipsy, I was certain I was over the limit. The seconds dragged on like minutes as I nervously waited for the results. To my relief, and surprise, the blood alcohol reading was .049, right on the lower end of the threshold, but just under. Ashley blew a big zero.

We came back into the bar and ordered supper.

After 2½ hours, I had consumed the equivalent of half a bottle of wine and a modest-sized meal — a chicken burger and fries. I got tested a second time, and again blew .049. Ashley, again, blew zero. I could not believe the re-

sults. I questioned Haffner's equipment. He assured me it was accurate, but humoured me by testing me again, 15 minutes later. That reading showed a drop to .044, indicating my body had already started eliminating the last drink.

Apparently it's true, you can consume roughly one drink an hour, even if you are petite like me.

In Ashley's case, after two zero readings, Haffner sent him back to the bar and told him to start chugging to get him on the radar. He downed two beers in 45 minutes, and immediately tested .097, which Haffner said was a false reading because of mouth alcohol. In the time it took Haffner to set up the machine and retest, a few minutes later, Ashley's reading had dropped to .044.

As not everyone gets to go out with the traffic police to test their alcohol limit, I brought along disposable breathalyzers, called Blow before you Go, to measure their accuracy against Haffner's equipment. The results matched every time.

The experiment taught me that social drinkers have nothing to fear from the new legislation. You can indeed go out and enjoy a few drinks, provided you pay attention to how you are feeling and drink responsibly.

It also resolved a long-standing dilemma in my household. He who blows zero, is the designated driver.

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The premier's hair

As it has done for all of its recent leaders, the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta is reimbursing Premier Alison Redford for some of her personal expenses. Because political contributions have a hefty 75 per cent tax deduction, the opposition says taxpayers have a right to know how much the party is giving Redford for what they say amounts to a salary top-up.

Because the money comes out of the party's general revenue fund, the party says it will not disclose how much Redford will receive, or for what. Considering that the political party tax benefit costs the provincial treasury as much as \$5 million each year, one could argue that this is not just party business, but the business of all taxpayers.

Using that argument, however, the party could say that the premier's expenses fall into the other 25 per cent. It

could become a ridiculous shell game.

There are larger issues confronting taxpayers than how much the party might be spending on the premier's hair. We recall that the federal Tories refused to divulge in 2007 how much it was spending on Stephen Harper's dresser, Michelle Muntean. In 1997, Preston Manning voluntarily disclosed that the Reform party provided him with a \$30,000 clothing allowance.

In 2001, then-premier Ralph Klein disclosed that he used party money to take his wife on a vacation to Phoenix, Ariz., and to pay for two flights aboard a Syncrude Canada jet to a fishing lodge in northern B.C.

Bill Smith, the Alberta PC party president, says personal vacations are now off the table, as they must be, given the potential for conflicts. The premier's other benefits are party business.

The anatomy of a pro-choice flip-flop



KATHLEEN PARKER

WASHINGTON

When the Democratic National Committee circulates an ad attacking Mitt Romney even before the Iowa caucuses — and long before his presidential nomination is clear — one can be fairly certain that Romney is considered the greatest threat to a second Obama term.

This alone should be sufficient endorsement to get reluctant Republicans on board, except for the fact that the ad is very effective. Titled "Mitt vs. Mitt: The story of two men trapped in one body," the ad traces the many now-familiar flip-flops of Romney's political career, including the seminal pro-choice to pro-life position.

The ad is good. The message is profound. And the effect may be irreversible. Nevertheless, voters deserve to know more than what a spliced-and-diced commercial suggests. As anyone in public life knows, a creative (or malicious) editor can create any impression he or she desires regardless of context or reality on the ground.

Watching the ad closely, you see not only a changing position, but also a changing Romney, from a youngish man with black hair to an older model with greying hair. Might the man have matured?

This is not to suggest that Romney hasn't changed his mind. There is a record. Then again, who but the most barnacled ideologue hasn't had a change of heart given new information?

It is helpful to know more

about a person's position than a carefully selected sound bite permits, but Romney's attempts to explain himself have failed to gain traction. So how does a person change from one position to the polar opposite on such a core issue as abortion? Easy. Countless women have changed their minds thanks to pregnancy and birth. Countless others have suffered the agony of revelation too late following an abortion. Men overjoyed by fatherhood, or crushed by the loss of a child through abortion, have also changed their minds.

Romney's own change of heart evolved not from personal experience, but rather from a purposeful course of study. I know this because I know the man who instructed him in 2005 on the basics of embryonic life during the stem cell

research debate then taking place in Massachusetts. As governor at the time, Romney was under intense pressure to help flip a state law that protected embryos from stem cell research. Some of that pressure came from Harvard University, Romney's alma mater, where scientists hoped to assume a leading role in stem cell research.

The politically expedient choice was obvious, but Romney took a more thoughtful approach and sought to educate himself before staking out a position. Enter William Hurlbut, a physician and professor of biomedical ethics at Stanford University Medical School. For several hours, Hurlbut and Romney met in the governor's office and went through the dynamics of conception, embryonic development and the reper-

cussions of research that targets nascent human life. It was not a light lunch.

The result of that conversation and others was a pro-life Romney, who, though he kept his campaign promise to honour the state's democratically asserted preference for abortion choice, began a new personal path that happened to serve him well, at least theoretically, among social conservatives. Was his conversion sincere? No one can know another's heart, but Hurlbut is convinced that it was.

"Several things about our conversation still stand out strongly in my mind," Hurlbut told me.

"First, he clearly recognized the significance of the issue, not just as a current controversy, but as a matter that would define the character of our culture way into the future.

"Second, it was obvious that he had put in a real effort to understand both the scientific prospects and the broader social implications. Finally, I was impressed by both his clarity of mind and sincerity of heart... He recognized that this was not a matter of purely abstract theory or merely pragmatic governance, but a crucial moment in how we are to regard nascent human life and the broader meaning of medicine in the service of life."

Whether one agrees with Hurlbut's appraisal or Romney's conclusions, this was at least a flip-flop of a higher order. Would that all our politics were so painstakingly crafted.

KATHLEEN PARKER IS A PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING COLUMNIST WITH THE WASHINGTON POST.

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