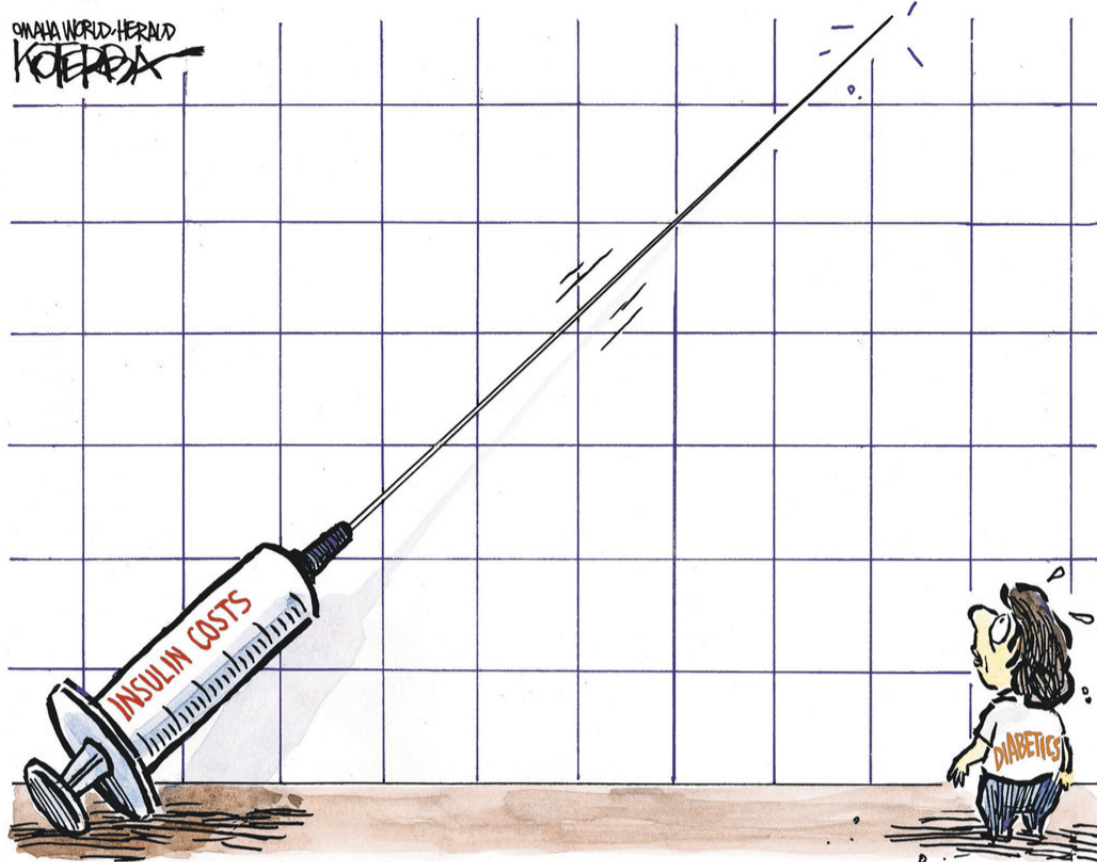


OUR VIEW

Spread the word: Insulin help available in Minnesota

CARTOONIST'S VIEW



Jeff Koterba/Cagle Cartoons

After aging off his parent's health insurance, 26-year-old Alec Smith decided to use the money he'd need to spend for his own coverage to pay for the insulin keeping him alive.

But it proved too expensive, and he left the pharmacy without his prescription. Back at his apartment, he tried to ration what he had. Four days later, he was found dead by his girlfriend. He was three days from his next paycheck.

"In my heart I knew right away that I wanted to do something," his mother, Nicole Smith-Holt, said in a video released last week by MNSure, Minnesota's health-insurance marketplace. "How do we take his death and turn it into something more than just his death, you know? I didn't want somebody in an emergency situation like Alec was in to be turned away from the pharmacy. Alec wasn't an isolated situation. There's a problem. Because somebody is going to pay it or they're going to die. It's very, very simple."

Doing something took three tries at the Minnesota Legislature. But in 2020, with bipartisan support, the Alec Smith Insulin Affordability Bill passed and was signed into state law. It created the Minnesota Insulin Safety Net Program, which provides emergency (that is, for diabetics who have less than a seven-day supply of insulin and face likely significant health consequences without more) 30-day supplies of insulin once a year for a

copy of no more than \$35 and up to a 90-day supply for no more than \$50 in copay for Minnesotans who need assistance longer term. The program is run by MNSure and the Minnesota Board of Pharmacy.

Minnesota diabetics should no longer feel like they have to ration their medicine the way Alec Smith tried unsuccessfully to do. No more

should Minnesota diabetics die because they can't afford their prescriptions.

"This is life or death for somebody who needs it, and they should not be turned away at the pharmacy because of cost," Smith-Holt further stated in the video. "So I really strongly encourage anybody who is dependent on insulin, you've had to advocate for yourself

for everything basically, don't stop advocating for yourself now."

In the Minnesota Insulin Safety Net Program's first full year, more than 1,100 Minnesotans took advantage, accessing more than \$6 million worth of insulin, according to a report from the Minnesota Board of Pharmacy, released last week. Concern persists, in

spite of that overwhelming success, that countless more Minnesotans are eligible for the program but don't know about it and are also taking dangerous risks like rationing. There's fear that Minnesotans continue to flirt with death by attempting to make do or get by on their own — though they no longer need to.

So spread the word. There's now help. It's an easy click away at mninsulin.org or a single phone call away to the MNSure Assister Resource Center at 651-539-2098 or toll free at 833-541-7698. There's no reason for Minnesota diabetics to die needlessly. Not anymore.

"(It) feels good to know that even though we lost Alec — and he should still be here today, you know — because of his death, he's paved the way for thousands of other people to live their long, happy, healthy life," said his mother.

DFL Rep. Michael Howard of Richfield, Minnesota, the lead author in the House of the Alec Smith Insulin Affordability Bill, is the author now, this session, of legislation to cap copayments on prescriptions for insulin and other life-saving medications like asthma inhalers and EpiPens.

"Alec's law continues to save lives," Howard said in an Associated Press report last week. "The increased number of Minnesotans utilizing this safety net underscores that our work isn't finished."

LOCAL VIEW

Duluth inviting tourists to 'love it like we do'

This year brought forth a bold new path for Duluth's tourism marketing. The city of Duluth came together with Visit Duluth and the agencies Belmont Partners and Lawrence & Schiller to elevate Duluth and ensure potential visitors view our city as the world-class destination we all know and love.

Our mantra for this year continues to be "partnership, collaboration, and unity." These words have helped to shape and inform our new strategy and approach.

Here's what we've been up to.

Partnership: Beginning Jan. 1, the city, Belmont Partners, Lawrence & Schiller, and Visit Duluth's convention and sports-marketing organization began working together under a single Visit Duluth umbrella brand to focus on bringing new travelers to Duluth and longer trips by all visitors. The team works in collaboration



TRICIA HOBBS

to provide resources and support to the local tourism community, including regular email communication, restaurant and retail alerts to support staffing plans, marketing insights and tips, and outreach. We've focused on providing a positive experience for visitors when they arrive, including support for Visit Duluth's new visitor center, opening soon.

Collaboration: Over the last three months, we've connected with many of Duluth's tourism industry leaders and stakeholders. Our local tourism community is vast, varied, and passionate, with a wealth of knowledge and experience. Their perspectives and ideas have been instrumental

in informing our decisions. Stakeholder input began early in the process and included surveys, focus groups, and forums. We continue to seek new opportunities for engagement and participation from local stakeholders, including Duluth Tourism Today, an industry-focused newsletter, and the soon-to-launch Duluth Tourism Advisory Board.

In February, we formed the Duluth Tourism Collaborative, comprised of the city of Duluth, Visit Duluth, and the Duluth Entertainment Convention Center, in partnership with Belmont Partners and Lawrence & Schiller. This group shares the common goal of promoting the great things our city has to offer visitors. This group will begin to offer regular gatherings for the industry, focused on creating space to learn and collaborate.

And unity: In January, we hit the

ground running with fresh content on social media, updates to the Visit Duluth website, and earned media to highlight the many things there are to do throughout our entire city. We also put a focus on the people of Duluth, introducing a "Faces of Duluth" series that highlights the people behind Duluth's attractions, events, and landmarks. We launched a winter travel campaign, encouraging people to explore Duluth past the traditional peak season. In just over one month, the campaign helped generate \$740,459 in tax revenue.

April brought the launch of our new marketing campaign, complete with new logo and refreshed brand look, which reintroduces Duluth to visitors. The campaign, "Love It Like We Do," features Duluth's longtime favorites alongside comparatively unknown facets of the city and even some of the hidden gems you can't find



On a visit to Duluth, Taylor Carriere of St. Cloud, Minnesota, takes a selfie near the mouth of the Lester River.

anywhere else. We're celebrating the things so many visitors know and love about Duluth — our breathtaking lake, nature, the city's world-class attractions and events, and outdoor recreation — while, at the same time, we're seeking to showcase Duluth's many neighborhoods, thriving arts and cultural experiences, dynamic food and beverage scene, rich history and historical sites, and family-friendly activities. We're inviting

visitors to love it like we do.

We continue to be excited about what's to come. After two long years of limited travel, we're thrilled to welcome travelers back to Duluth. And as one of the Midwest's most unique destinations, we're expecting big things ahead.

Tricia Hobbs is a senior economic developer for the city of Duluth focused on tourism and arts. She is responsible for the coordination of contracts for Belmont Partners, Lawrence & Schiller, and Visit Duluth. She also serves as a liaison for the local tourism community.

VETERANS' VIEW

Corporate greed has no place in health care for poor

Americans are no strangers to greedy corporations taking advantage of government bureaucracy. Big companies spend millions every year lobbying our dysfunctional government to manipulate legislation in their favor. It isn't surprising that these corporations are still finding new ways to bolster their bottom lines at the expense of people.

Right now, greedy hospital



JOEL HELLER

corporations are exploiting a poorly designed federal program that gives drug-pricing discounts to nonprofit medical centers which provide charity care for uninsured and low-income patients. This program, called the 340B Drug Pricing Program, established under the Veterans Health Care Act of 1992, doesn't explicitly define how the savings should be used and has extremely broad eligibility criteria, leaving it vulnerable to exploitation. Hospitals recognized these

loopholes and wasted no time trying to qualify themselves as "nonprofit" hospitals. They began greedily buying up community care centers, such as independent physician offices and practices that did not used to be 340B eligible, and converted them into offsite hospital outpatient departments to gain access to 340B discounts. The 340B program went from covering 90 charity-care hospitals to a whopping 2,500, some of which are criticized for providing inadequate charity care to patients while lining their pockets with the savings.

A recent study by the nonpartisan Pacific Research Institute's Center for Medical Economics and Innovation compared 340B hospitals to non-340B hospitals across eight states and found that not only do the nonprofit 340B hospitals make 37% more in profits compared to the average of all hospitals, they give 22% less of their net patient revenue to charity care than all hospitals. This is even though these 340B hospitals are supposed to provide charity care.

Amidst an ongoing global health crisis, this equates to additional suffering because

of corporate greed and yet another government program that has gotten way too big. Leaders should find ways to help low-income and uninsured folks access health care, not give away discounts to hospitals that may hoard the savings for themselves.

Congress needs to close 340B loopholes and downsize the program immediately.

Joel Heller of Duluth is a veteran and a member of the Minnesota DFL Veterans Caucus. Ellen M. Perrault of St. Paul contributed to this column. She works for the Minnesota DFL as a communications consultant and is a former morning news producer for WDIO-TV in Duluth. The views expressed here are Heller's alone.