

Opinion

A Kansas Viewpoint



More headlines than solutions

Lawrence Journal World
 Kansas Attorney General Phill Kline is grandstanding again. The attorney general announced that his office was launching an investigation of the billing and collection practices of the state's not-for-profit hospitals. The rising cost of health care makes hospital bills a handy hot-button issue that Kline seemed eager to exploit.

"Hospitals have a right to be paid for the services that they render," he said. "But that right does not extend to unconscionable and coercive collection practices."

The problem with collection practices apparently is so great that Kline found it necessary to launch a full-fledged investigation of the matter.

There are 121 not-for-profit hospitals in the state ... and every one of them would be investigated.

But what did the hospitals do to deserve such scrutiny? Kline said he was spurred into action by several complaints from consumers, but he declined to give details about the complaints or how many hospitals were involved.

The most egregious cases cited by Kline were instances in which hospitals sent claims to the wrong insurance company.

It is completely unfair to cast a pall over all not-for-profit hospitals when only a small minority may warrant scrutiny. And why only not-for-profit hospitals? Are for-profit hospitals in Kansas any less likely to engage in unacceptable billing and collection practices, or do their corporate structures simply make them a more difficult target for the AG?

If the attorney general were less interested in making headlines and more interested in actually solving this problem for consumers, he would have bypassed the flashy investigation and pursued a more constructive approach. Individual hospitals are cooperating with AG investigators and officials of the Kansas Hospital Association are working with the AG's office to develop a system of best practices for billing and collections.

That's where the problem ultimately will be solved, not at a press conference.

Comments to any opinions expressed on this page are encouraged. Mail them to the Colby Free Press, 155 W. 5th St., Colby, Kan., 67701. Or e-mail jvanostrand@nwkansas.com or pdecker@nwkansas.com.

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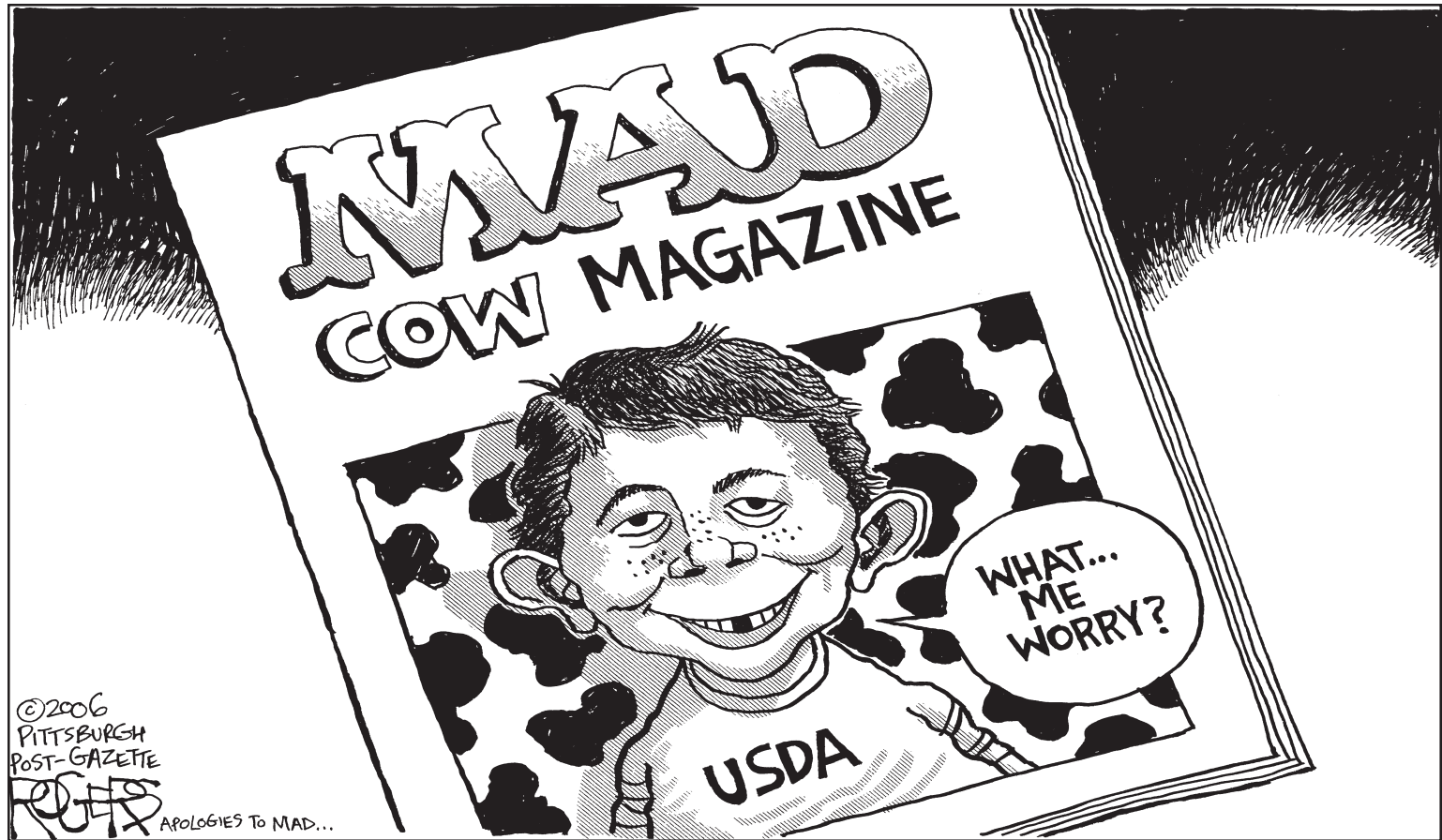
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A look at the uncomfortable

I watched the 78th annual Academy Awards a couple of weeks ago, as I always do. I love movies, and I always tune in. This year was no exception, but I think this year's ceremony left more than me with a bitter taste in my mouth.

I was surprised to see that "Brokeback Mountain" didn't win the top prize for best picture.

Controversy has been with the movie since word first hit the street it was being made. Pre-release, and afterward, the media called it "the gay cowboy movie."

It's so much more than that, and let me explain why I think it should have won.

A story about love and intolerance, "Brokeback Mountain" is based on Annie Proulx's Pulitzer Prize-winning short story of the same name, and chronicles the love of two cowboys.

They meet one summer while working on a Wyoming ranch and start a relationship that lasts many years. Both get married and have children, but can't forget each other.

By not selecting "Brokeback," I believe the member-voters of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences chose the safer option of "Crash" to win best picture.

"Crash" was no less controversial in its own right, and was better received by American audiences. The subject of that movie was race relations and intolerance.

"Crash" shared that one common theme with "Brokeback Mountain," but didn't seem to garner the same kind attention.

"Brokeback" director Ang Lee took home the directing award, and the movie received two others — best musical score and adapted screenplay. In the best since the awards ceremony, Lee said he didn't intend the movie to be a "political statement." (<http://www.manoramaonline.com/>)

After the Oscars, someone pointed out to me



Tisha Cox

• Off The Beaten Path

that "End of the Spear," a film that's been embraced by many because of its message about forgiveness, had a gay actor, Chad Allen, play the lead.

That begs the question — what's the difference? Granted, Allen's orientation has nothing to do with the movie, and it's been mentioned that no one has really made an issue about that while "Brokeback Mountain" has been singled out because of its subject matter.

Some conservatives were upset over Allen's involvement in the movie, while others didn't make an issue out of it because they said what mattered most was the movie's message.

And in the media, they keep hyping the "gay cowboy" aspect. No one bothers to point out how that one ends. I can honestly say I was stunned when I finished reading the story last year. I already knew how it ended, thanks to my sister, but it didn't lessen the impact of the story, or its ending.

I'm not the only one who thought the academy voted on a safer choice. For a week, speculation was rife in newspapers and the Internet.

Though Lee said he was disappointed his film didn't win, he also said he made an "ordinary" movie.

I had the opportunity to see the film, and it was anything but ordinary. More than the "gay cow-

boy movie," it captured the beauty of the American West, and the joys and sometime quiet desperation that comes from living in the rural west.

The expectations, doing what is expected instead of what is right is at the heart of the story.

That is what the story is about — two people who do what they think they should, instead of making the right choice for them, and being open and honest with themselves and a world that can't, and won't accept them because of a simple chance of circumstance.

The bottom line is they didn't choose who they loved.

"Brokeback Mountain" is a story about love, plain and simple. An unconventional love story. Set against one of the most iconic backgrounds in America.

That's what set the short story apart, and the motion picture.

It's also about fear and intolerance.

In the end, I think the movie raises difficult questions with no easy answers.

"Brokeback Mountain" made many people uncomfortable, but at least it has people talking. Whether the fallout is good or bad has yet to be seen.

This movie did raise some interesting questions — why are people so afraid, and why are they so willing to condemn what they don't understand?

I'm not saying anyone should embrace the movie, or its themes. But maybe take a hard look at what makes them so afraid, or uncomfortable, whatever the issue is, and confront it.

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Legislature faces big issues

A large number of hot button issues came before the House last week as we near the end of our regular session.

Committees wrap up Tuesday with the product of many weeks of hearings and debates advanced to the full House for review. The House also paused to remember Gordon Parks who passed away last week and had a ceremony to recognize a few of the members of the task force participating in identification and capture of the BTK killer.

Photos of the ceremony and other Legislative activities are available by visiting http://www.morrisonfamily.com/legislative_photos_2006.htm

Tax reduction (I supported), work comp (voted against), concealed carry (supported) and 2007 appropriations (supported with amendments) were among bills considered by the House last week.

Sales Tax on Rebates

We see commercials every day advertising incentives to entice us to buy a new vehicle.

Among these is the cash back incentive offering a "factory rebate" of several thousand dollars when you purchase a new vehicle that is normally deducted from the purchase price.

Currently, if you were to buy a \$20,000 car and be offered a \$3,000 rebate, even though you only pay \$17,000 for the car, you are charged sales tax on the full \$20,000. In essence, you are paying sales tax on \$3,000 you never spent. House Bill (HB) 2640 eliminates this tax. It passed Monday by a wide margin and now is in the Senate. I supported this legislation.

Workman's Compensation

Contentious debate surrounded the workers,



Jim Morrison

• Capitol Review

compensation bill, (SB461), when it reached the House floor.

Supporters of the bill argued it was not a "disposable worker" bill as many have suggested, but that it helps to protect employers from paying for injuries sustained by workers prior to their employment with their current company or for an injury that didn't occur at the workplace.

Major portions of the bill remained unchanged and the existing statute still protects workers injured on the job. However, the old high school football injury or the weekend water skiing accident shouldn't be the responsibility of the employer, proponents argued. Opponents suggested the bill was unfriendly to injured workers, would not reduce fraud and would likely result in more, not less, litigation, in order to determine any preexisting conditions a worker may have had.

After the vote was taken, a call of the House was issued. Several members changed their votes during the call, but when the final tally was read the bill passed 67-56. I voted against the bill supporting the current status of Work Comp.

Concealed Carry

By a vote of 90-33, the House passed SB 418

to allow licensed Kansans to carry concealed firearms (I supported). The Senate followed the House lead by voting 30-10 to adopt the bill with changes suggested by the House.

The changes included additions to the list of places where you are prohibited from carrying a concealed weapon. The bill requires a training course and licensure from the Attorney General's office.

With 90 votes for passage in the House, and 30 votes in the Senate, this bill was sent to the Governor with a veto-proof majority in both chambers. She has until March 31 (maybe till midnight?) to veto, sign or let the bill become law without her signature.

In a related matter, the House passed HB 2577, which removes from statute a citizens "duty to retreat" by establishing a justified use of force provision. The proposed law allows for you to defend yourself if you have a "reasonable fear of imminent death or great bodily harm to such person's self or another" (I also supported this legislation).

Franchise Tax

The House voted Thursday 92-30 to phase out the franchise tax in Kansas (I supported). HB 2548 would reduce the rate of the corporation franchise tax from the current 0.125 percent of shareholder equity or net worth to 0.083 percent for tax year 2007; and to 0.41 percent for tax year 2008.

The tax would be repealed altogether, effective for tax year 2009. The intent of the removal of this tax is to encourage existing businesses to remain in Kansas and other businesses to establish franchises in the State.

Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

