

Staying Alive

Death costs more

MATTHEW EDLUND M.D.

Contributing Columnist
health@lbknews.com

Sarasota County has announced that cremations will now cost a further \$35. Since there are more than 6,000 deaths a year, that represents more than \$200,000 in added county revenue.

Is this \$35 a carbon tax to offset the effects of global warming that threaten to leave our region under water? No. The money goes to the coroner's office, which must sign off on bodies whose deaths might have come from foul play or medical mishaps. Yet the number of autopsies continues to decline.

You learn a lot from autopsies, but medical quality control is something else that costs too much.

Doing better, feeling worse

In the early seventies, Dr. John Knowles, chief of Massachusetts General Hospital, edited an issue of the journal *Daedalus* entitled "Doing Better But Feeling Worse." Knowles and others noted the "excessive" increases in health care costs. With health care costing 5 percent of American GNP, the authors worried that the massive increases might soon start to bankrupt the economy.

Ask General Motors. Today health care alone is approximately 15 percent of GNP. In the more than 35 years since that issue of *Daedalus*, American lifespan has arguably increased two years. With our GNP now around \$12.5 to \$13 billion, each added year of life is costing about \$625 billion.

Naturally this metric is very unfair, not taking any account of the quality of life improvements of modern medical care.

However, it does not consider advances in national public health. Many researchers would ascribe the increased lifespan of Americans more to decreased smoking than improved medical technology.

Unfortunately, America remains fixated on health care, not health. Partly due to our peculiar kind of special interest politics, much of that money goes to medical industries and ever expanding insurance and hospital empires, not to programs that cost effectively improve national health.

Statins for tots

The tragic state of American health care is illustrated by the American Academy of Pediatrics recent recommendation that 8-year-olds with high cholesterol levels be given statins, and that perhaps some a year old be placed on the same drugs.

The committee making the recommendations was not, like so many others, made up of members directly paid by companies making such drugs. However, the crucial importance of Big Pharma to clinical academic research is now so unconsciously ingrained that the committee only paid lip service to those public health bugaboos, physical activity and food.

Our considered national response: got a problem — take a pill.

Do people know what taking statins will do to an 8-year-old? Do they know what effects it will have in 40 or 50 years?

Absolutely not. We have the example of baycol of how statins can destroy the lives of some people. Yet our myopia is more profound.

What makes more sense — getting kids to take a statin or ride their bike or walk to school? What makes more sense — government subsidies to high fructose corn syrup in the further subsidized school lunches that help make our children among the fattest in the world, or subsidizing school garden plots where students learn about food and get a little exercise?



The results of our national policies are just outside my office window, as I watch hundreds of Sarasota High School students park their cars. Many disabled patients can't find a place to park.

These are systems issues that speak to more than our public health but to our economic competitiveness, even our survival. Having people walk or bike to school and work decreases energy dependence on regimes that want us dead; can prevent the epidemic wave of diabetes and obesity that will quickly bankrupt our overstressed health care system; will produce less global warming that threatens our homes; and can lead to a more interconnected and ecologically balanced community, where people look out for children and workers as they move past homes and stores.

Our medical care system remains a crazy political football, where proximity to Wall Street profits translates into far higher medical incomes than taking the time to listen to and care for patients. General Electric and lobbyists have a lot more clout than your general practitioner does. Three thousand medical insurance schemes that change their rules every day is something out of Kafka, not the standard of the "leading nation in the world."

Our slow economic death on the installment plan will continue until we recognize that public health, energy independence and communities that will survive and thrive through global warming require national policies that simultaneously stimulate all three.

So called "market forces" that brought us the American health care system and our mortgage mess will not save us. American ingenuity and a little bit of political thinking will. Otherwise, everything, including death, will cost more.

Dr. Matthew Edlund practices sleep medicine and psychiatry in Sarasota. His new book, "Designed To Last," is available online. He can be reached at 365-4308 and via his Web site at doctoredlund.com.

Key Travel

Buffalo nickels, forgotten mosques in Bosnia-Herzegovina

RICK STEVES

Contributing Columnist
steves@lbknews.com

These days Croatia's Dalmatian Coast is inundated with tourists — and understandably so. But after a visit to Dubrovnik, the "Pearl of the Adriatic," I'm in the mood for a good Balkan adventure and decide to drive directly inland ... to Bosnia-Herzegovina.

While most of Europe is doing away with border formalities, just the opposite seems to be the case in this part of Europe — a new set of borders pop up each year. The border station between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina feels like the bleak frontier post between two nations that less than two decades ago were at war. It also feels like the gateway to the perfect antidote to Dubrovnik's tourist crowds.

Bosnia-Herzegovina's three main groups — Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks — come from virtually identical ethnic stock. They just have different religions: Orthodox Christian, Catholic Christian and Muslim, respectively. A typical tourist cannot determine the religion or loyalties of the people just by looking at them. Studying the complex demographics of the former Yugoslavia, you gain a respect for the communist-era dictator Tito — the one man who could hold this place together peacefully. And you understand why it fell apart when he died. (To learn more about

the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, visit www.ricksteves.com/yugo.)

Bosnia-Herzegovina is one nation, historically divided into two regions: Bosnia and Herzegovina. But the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords gerrymandered the country along other lines, granting a degree of autonomy to the area where Orthodox Serbs predominate. This "Republika Srpska" rings the core of mostly Muslim Bosnia on three sides. When asked for driving tips, Croats — who, because of lingering bad feelings about the Serbs, avoid this territory — insist that the road I want to take doesn't even exist. From the main Croatian coastal road just south of Dubrovnik, directional signs send you to the tiny Croatian border town, but ignore the large Serb city of Trebinje just beyond.

And yet, Trebinje not only exists it's bustling and prosperous. As I enter the town, police with ping-pong paddle stop signs pull me over — you must drive with your headlights on at all hours. The "dumb tourist" routine gets me off the hook. I enjoy a vibrant market scene, and get cash at an ATM to buy some produce. (Even here — the most remote place I've been in Europe — ATMs are plentiful.)

Bosnia-Herzegovina's money is called the "convertible mark." I don't know if they are just thrilled that their money is now changeable with other currencies, but I remember a time when it wasn't.



RICK STEVES/Longboat Key News

This charred mosque is a poignant reminder of more difficult times in Nevesinje ... and of what's been lost.

I stow a few Bosnian coins as souvenirs. They have the charm of Indian pennies and buffalo nickels. Some local bills have Cyrillic lettering and Serb historical figures, while others use "our" alphabet and show Muslims or Croats. Like everything else in Bosnia-Herzegovina the currency is a careful balancing act.

Later, after a two-hour drive on deserted roads through a rugged landscape, I arrive at the humble crossroads village of

Nevesinje. Towns in this region all have a "cafe row," and Nevesinje is no exception. It's lunchtime, but as I walk through the town, I don't see a soul with any food on their plate — just drinks. Apparently locals eat (economically) at home ... and then enjoy an affordable coffee or drink at a cafe.

I realize that I won't find a real restaurant here. But a cluttered little gro-

Travel, page 14