Opinion: The case against chlorinated water

By Josh Harkinson, Mother Jones

The chlorination of municipal tap water is considered one of the 20th century's best public health ideas. The American Water Works Association credits the practice with increasing life expectancy by 50 percent over the past century by virtually eliminating water-borne diseases such as typhoid fever and cholera.

But chlorine in drinking water can cause health risks of its own. And while some of the of those risks, such as reactions with organic compounds that can yield toxic byproducts, are relatively well understood and managed, at least one has been largely overlooked: The effect of chlorinated drinking water on the beneficial bacteria in our guts.

We simply don't know enough about the microbial ecosystem in the human gut to identify every type of bacteria that's important, much less how well those bacteria survive when we guzzle mildly chlorinated tap water.

The notion that our bodies' 100 trillion bacteria act as a crucial internal ecosystem, a sort of sixth human organ, has only recently gained currency among mainstream scientists. Researchers now believe a lack of beneficial bacteria in the gut can trigger certain autoimmune diseases, among them diabetes, asthma, and even neurological conditions such as autism. Those conditions have spread in step with Western society's war on germs, which has scorched our good bacteria along with the bad, throwing our bodies' microbiomes off balance in the same way that a slashed and burned rainforest becomes susceptible to invasive weeds.

Read the whole story

Editorial: Changing how Calif. grades its schools

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the Aug. 6, 2014, Los Angeles Times.***

The Academic Performance Index, by which California schools have been judged over the last 14 years, is about to get an overhaul. That's fine; the index basically boiled down standardized test scores to a single number. As a result, it overemphasized testing in math and English while giving short shrift to whether students were learning to write well or to do research. It downplayed science, history, arts and physical education.

Two years ago, Gov. Jerry Brown signed legislation to beef up the API by including some of the important measures of education beyond math and English scores. High schools, for example, would be judged by graduation rates and by how prepared their students were for college or jobs. Whether other measures should be added was left to the state Board of Education; possibilities included how many students take Advanced Placement courses and how many pass the AP tests, adjusted for the demographics of the school. Schools might be judged in part on portfolios of students' work or the depth of their science instruction.

At the moment, the API is on hiatus; the state will not be using it for a couple of years while California schools introduce an entirely new English and math curriculum based on the Common Core standards that have been adopted by about 40 states. Common Core will bring major change, and it would be unfair to judge schools during the early years as students

take unfamiliar tests and get used to a new way of learning. The hiatus offers the state a good opportunity to rethink how the API is calculated.

Read the whole story

Letter: Elks spend time at Bread & Broth

To the community,

Bread & Broth would like to thank the Tahoe/Douglas Elks Lodge No. 2670 for sponsoring their third Adopt A Day of Nourishment for 2014 on July 28.

“Elks are always on hand to help our community and vets,” said Roger Barragan as he volunteered at B&B’s Monday evening dinner.

B&B appreciates the support that the Tahoe/Douglas Elks Lodge has given to aiding our program in feeding the needy of our community.

With the donation of $250, the Elks Lodge sponsored a spaghetti meal that fed 108 dinner guests with 32 diners coming back for seconds and many “to go” containers given out at the end of the dinner. These meals feed the elderly living on fixed incomes, families in need, the working poor as well as those living outdoors. On many cases, B&B’s meals are the only full course, nutritious meals that our diners receive.

In addition to the Elk Lodge’s financial support, lodge members Roger and Jeanne Barragan, and Don and Dee Young donated their time once again to come in and help the B&B

volunteers.

“We look forward to helping our community,” said Jeanne Barragan.

B&B looks forward to teaming with the Tahoe/Douglas Elk Lodge No. 2670 in helping the less fortunate in the Lake Tahoe South Shore Community.

Carol Gerard, Bread & Broth

Opinion: Medicare billing not a simple answer

By Sue Fairley and Lisa Fisher

Hospital care can be complex and expensive. Strangely, a short hospital trip may cost more than an extended stay.

Sound familiar? In October 2013, Medicare enacted the “two-midnight rule” to discourage hospital inpatient admissions. Medicare patients staying longer than two midnights in the hospital, excluding discharge, may be considered inpatients. Medicare patients that stay less than two midnights typically receive outpatient or “observation status.”

Observation status costs more for Medicare patients and hospitals. Insurance companies likely will model Medicare’s limited reimbursement plan which means non-Medicare patients may soon experience this change.

Barton wants to help Medicare patients and their families better understand how the “two-midnight rule” affects the patient’s health and financial responsibility.

Am I affected?

Any Medicare patient that enters a hospital for emergency care requiring admission is assessed for inpatient or observation status. Based on the patient's medical condition and symptoms, a medical provider uses Medicare's established "two-midnight rule" criteria to determine the patient's status.

Why does it cost more?

Medicare charges "observation status" like outpatient treatments that occur outside the hospital setting. Outpatients are expected to pay line-by-line for services and both the patients and hospital receives far less reimbursement than an admitted inpatient.

Will I receive less quality care as an outpatient?

All patients admitted to the hospital receive the same level of expertise and care.

How can hospital staff determine how long I will stay when I arrive? If my condition worsens, can I change from outpatient to inpatient status?

When a patient is admitted to the hospital, the hospital staff considers many factors to determine the patient's status, such as symptoms, treatment needs, and severity of condition/illness. Physicians use these findings, in conjunction with the established criteria from Medicare, to best determine how long a patient will remain in the hospital. If conditions and circumstances change, admission status can change to match the care needed.

To ensure that medical staff has admitted the patient to the correct status, Barton contracts with Executive Health Resources (EHR) to verify the admitted patient matches the correct status under Medicare Guidelines.

Should I insist I be considered inpatient status instead of

observation?

If only it were that simple. Medicare has instituted the “two-midnight rule” which medical providers are required to follow, and are the same for every hospital nationwide.

Why can’t the hospital just absorb the increase in costs for observation status?

When Medicare reimbursements decrease, hospitals and medical providers must find other ways to make up this decrease in revenue. The hospital cannot absorb these extra costs and still provide the variety and quality of services to the community. Thus, some costs trickle down to the patient.

Barton Health strives to help patients with financial hardship. In 2013, Barton donated nearly $7 million in care to patients that qualified for financial assistance.

How can I find out what Medicare covers?

For a comprehensive list of Medicare coverage, go online.

Sue Fairley is vice president of Nursing and Ancillary Services and Lisa Fisher is director of Case Management and Social Services for Barton Health.

Letter: League teaching kids to keep Tahoe blue

To the community,

The League to Save Lake Tahoe hosted a Stewards of Stormwater event in Incline Village on Aug. 7 in partnership with Tahoe

Family Solutions' Camp Explore program, IVGID, the Nevada Tahoe Conservation District, and Washoe County. Over 50 kids from Tahoe Family Solutions along with other volunteers helped place 41 metal markers on storm drains that lead to Lake Tahoe and picked up 40 pounds of litter on the streets.

This community volunteer project educates and engages the public about protecting our waterways from illegal dumping of wastes into the Lake Tahoe watershed. Marking community storm drains with "Keep Tahoe Blue – No Dumping" markers helps to keep pollutants out of Lake Tahoe's environment. The communities around Lake Tahoe have outdated storm drain systems that discharge directly into the Lake or its tributaries. Washing automobiles and dumping household wastes into the storm drain system can have substantial impacts to water quality and public health.

Roughly 43 pipes enter directly into in Lake Tahoe, carrying untreated stormwater, sediment and other pollutants in runoff from our local communities. One of the easiest and most effective ways to be proactive about keeping Tahoe blue is to not dump anything into storm drains. The Stewards of Stormwater program is a great way to mobilize communities, and we are grateful for our collaboration with Incline Village organizations to help do this important work.

"We are very excited for the Camp Explore kids to work with the League to Save Lake Tahoe," said Sharon Silva, director of Camp Explore. "It fits perfectly with our mission of educating kids about stewardship of the outdoors. It will also allow the kids to become experts on a component of keeping Tahoe blue and to then share that information with their families and neighbors."

Volunteers also learned about water basins, how stormwater runoff impacts lake clarity, how to properly dispose of chemicals and the importance of no dumping.

Marilee Movius, League to Save Lake Tahoe's community engagement manager

---

Opinion: Preserve Washoe Meadows State Park

By Charles Goldman

California's state parks face an uncertain future if the Parks Forward Commission, Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature focus primarily on the financial, infrastructure and management woes of lands held in the public trust. Instead, they should equally resolve to protect the natural resources that are the essence and the foundation of our parks system. As well, the Parks Department could – and should – lead initiatives to address climate change, water conservation and renewable energy sources.

Early commission statements and persistent Parks Department actions do not demonstrate the will or intent to tackle these challenges.



Charles Goldman

A particular example of State Parks' obstinacy – dating from

the previous scandal-plagued administration – is a Tahoe project that contravenes legislatively enacted parkland protection, betrays natural resource preservation and snubs the problems of climate change. The case in point is the proposal to expand up to nine holes of a golf course into Washoe Meadows State Park near South Lake Tahoe. This incursion is possible only because of an unprecedented move – pushed by the Parks Department for 2011 Parks Commission approval – to downgrade Washoe Meadows' state park status.

I was among the scientists in 1972 who opposed development to this sensitive riparian area along the Upper Truckee River. Lawsuits ensued until 1984, when the state purchased the land and assigned some 600 acres to State Parks to protect the "rare and irreplaceable natural resources" of what became Washoe Meadows State Park. But State Parks has now betrayed that protection with its golf course proposal, presented under the guise of river restoration and Lake Tahoe clarity.

My 1972 opinion is substantially unchanged, and all aspects of my original testimony still apply: This parkland must be protected for its significant environmental values and its link to all of the Tahoe basin.

It is extremely important to minimize fertilizer use in the Tahoe basin, especially where irrigation is involved. The proposed project imperils lake clarity due to the serious potential of fertilizer input from the golf course. Our 1972 concerns included the park's high water table, since added irrigation water increases the risk of surfeit nutrient percolation into the groundwater and then into the river. Despite contemporary golf course maintenance promises, the threats remain of surface and subsurface transport of fertilizer nutrients to the lake's largest tributary.

Adding to the problem, the topography of the proposed golf course, with greens in the uphill forest as well as in the floodplain and stream environmental zone, provides a system in

which the normal hydrological force of gravity will press fertilizers toward the river and then to the lake.

Since my 1972 comments, Lake Tahoe has changed from a nitrogen-limited system to a highly phosphorus-limited system. While phosphorus is now the nutrient limiting factor, both elements are detrimental to the lake since they are the driving force for algal growth that accelerates the decline in water quality and contributes to deep water oxygen depletion.

Sediment is a major concern since it reduces transparency. Because the proposed golf course construction requires an extreme amount of soil disturbance, State Parks' environmental report noted a risk of increased sedimentation reaching the lake for up to seven years.

My colleague Jerry Qualls at UNR expresses alarm about the course's impact on Washoe Meadows' world-renowned fens – expansive peat-forming wetlands some 10,000 years old – that depend on mineral-rich groundwater. He and I concur that State Parks lacks detailed mapping and awareness of the park's underground hydrology. Extensive construction, excavation and expected irrigation demands could destroy the fragile wetlands that enhance air and water quality throughout the basin.

As a limnologist and president of the World Water and Climate Network, I lecture on climate change's effects on global lakes and rivers. The proposed golf course represents a poor climate-change-related choice for many reasons: the use of irrigation water while precipitation declines; the potential increase in river water temperature as irrigation water is taken from the river; and the removal of carbon-dioxide-absorbing trees.

The planned cutting of some 1,600 trees in Washoe Meadows negates State Parks' lauded 2010 reforestation project at San Diego County's Cuyamaca Rancho State Park that sequestered the equivalent of more than 11,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide.

The state's environmental report in support of the golf course equivocates on the climate change issue, saying that the project's cumulative effects are "too speculative for a meaningful significant conclusion." This approach trivializes the issue, and further study is warranted.

Climate change can never again be ignored in any serious environmental document. State Parks should now address the already obvious need to adapt any and all projects to climate change. It should be addressed through analysis that meets rigorous scientific standards rather than political or fiscal expediency.

State Parks and the park commission should reconsider the project that would decimate the heart of Washoe Meadows and affect the Tahoe basin. They must expand their overall vision for California's state parks. The need to adapt to climate change, to address water supply and quality issues and to initiate renewable energy projects must become central to their stewardship of our publicly held natural resources.

Charles Goldman is a retired professor from the UC Davis department of environmental science and policy. Goldman is the president of the World Water and Climate Foundation.

Editorial: Stop underhanded attempts to obstruct abortion access

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the Aug. 5, 2014, Los Angeles Times.***

Several states have enacted laws in recent years that require doctors who perform abortions at clinics to have admitting privileges at nearby hospitals. These laws, masquerading as measures to protect the health of women, are nothing more than underhanded attempts to obstruct access to abortion services. In every state where such a law has been passed, it would result in the closure of at least some abortion clinics, making it substantially more difficult for women to get the reproductive healthcare to which they are constitutionally entitled.

A federal appeals court panel late last month blocked Mississippi's version of the law from going into effect, noting that it would close the only abortion clinic in the state, in violation of the Constitution. The doctors at the clinic had tried and failed to get admitting privileges at the seven hospitals in the area; at five of the seven they were denied because the hospitals refuse privileges to any doctor who performs abortions, presumably to avoid controversy or for religious reasons.
lRelated Will a federal judge strike down a restrictive Alabama abortion law?

This week, U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson ruled that an Alabama law requiring admitting privileges was unconstitutional and would force three of the state's five abortion clinics to close. If this law doesn't create an undue burden on women, Thompson wrote, then "no regulation, short of those imposing an outright prohibition on abortion, would." A similar law in Wisconsin — which has not gone into effect pending a court decision — would close the busiest of the state's four clinics, overburdening the remaining three, which already have waiting lists. In Texas, a federal appeals court ruling upholding the admitting privileges requirement has shut about half the abortion clinics in the state, according to a team of researchers based at the University of Texas; more than 1 million women of childbearing age now live more than

100 miles from the nearest abortion clinic.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Time to shed light on CalPERS' private equity investments

By Peter Scheer

The public has grown accustomed to "pay to play" scandals and other misconduct at CalPERS, the nation's largest public employee pension plan with over $300 million in investments. Still, the former CEO's guilty plea entered in federal court last week was shocking even by CalPERS' standards. Frederico Buenrostro, CalPERS' top official from 2002 to 2008, acknowledged in his plea agreement with the government that he had taken $200,000 in cash bribes, delivered in paper bags and shoe boxes, to influence CalPERS' investment decisions in private equity funds.

The paper bags and shoe boxes are a nice touch.

CalPERS and other public employee pensions, struggling to meet soaring obligations to retirees, have turned increasingly to alternative investments, and in particular to private equity deals, in order to boost their overall rates of return. Financial experts disagree about whether this strategy (also popular among college and university endowments) is sound or poses too much risk for "defined benefit" pensions promising specific benefit payments upon retirement. (Think Social Security.)

Regardless of the outcome of that debate, there is no debating that private equity investments lack the transparency of investments in stocks, bonds and other publicly traded securities. There is very little that the public doesn't know, or can't easily find out, about CalPERS' investments in publicly traded securities: their value, performance, amount of leverage (and other measures of risk), fees paid, officers' compensation—to name just a few. But little, if any, of this information is available for private equity deals.

The "private" in private equity means secret. And secrecy in government decisionmaking, rarely a good thing, is especially dangerous when it hides an agency's decisions about literally billions of dollars of investments. The secrecy surrounding CalPERS' private equity investments, combined with the temptations facing CalPERS' investment staff and directors, and the incentives of private equity managers and their agents, creates a climate in which (to put it mildly) the public interest is almost certain to be subordinated to private interests.

Excessive secrecy made it possible for Buenrostro to take bribes from his friend and former CalPERS' director, Alfred J.R. Villalobos, and for Villalobos, who is also under indictment, to solicit multi-million-dollar finder's fees from private equity firms for facilitating CalPERS' investments in their funds. More recently, the Securities and Exchange Commission has raised questions about whether some private equity firms have ripped off their investors, including public pension funds, by accounting improperly for fees paid to related firms. This emerging scandal is also made possible by excessive secrecy—in particular, the secrecy surrounding CalPERS' partnership agreements with private equity funds.

Secrecy serves the interests of private equity firms far more than the interests of their investor-clients. Nonetheless, public pensions in California—not only CalPERS, but also CalSTRS, the pension fund for public school teachers, and the

University of California's endowment (which funds faculty pensions, among other things)—prevailed on the Legislature in 2007 to enact, for their private equity deals, secrecy protection that is excessive, unnecessary—and, consequently, dangerous. (The law, an amendment to the Public Records Act, is Government Code section 6254.26).

Although some degree of legal protection may be justified for genuine trade secrets and competitively sensitive business strategies (sections 6254.26(a)(1)&(4)), there is no basis for sealing up specifics on the legal and financial arrangements between CalPERS and its private equity funds. (Section 6254.26(a)(6)). The funds, of course, want to keep these records secret so investor A won't be able to find out if investor B got a better deal. That certainly doesn't benefit CalPERS (unless you believe, against all odds, that CalPERS always negotiates the best deal).

More important, secrecy for legal and financial deal terms puts CalPERS at a huge disadvantage in monitoring its private equity investments. The fund managers know everything about the fund investments, while CalPERS knows almost nothing. This all but assures that if an investment is experiencing severe but undisclosed financial difficulties, CalPERS won't learn of it (until too late). And this all but assures that if CalPERS is getting ripped off—whether due to fraud or mistake, whether on the part of the private equity firm or third-parties—CalPERS will never detect it.

There is no substitute for transparency to uncover and deter abuse in financial investments. It's time to shed some light on CalPERS' private equity deals.

Peter Scheer is executive director of the First Amendment Coalition.

Letter: Reminder about being fire safe

To the community,

This is a public safety service message to remind all residents of South Lake Tahoe that due to extreme fire danger and severe drought conditions throughout the state of California, there remains no outdoor open burning of any type within the city limits.

The city of South Lake Tahoe and the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department have adopted section 307 of the California Fire Code prohibiting open burning “when atmospheric conditions or local circumstances make such fires hazardous”.

For further information go online.

Sallie Ross-Filgo, South Lake Tahoe Fire Department

Letter: Heavenly takes a turn at Bread & Broth

To the community,

“I really enjoy being a part of Heavenly’s Adopt A Day and support what the Bread & Broth organization is accomplishing in our community,” said Tom Maugeri, Heavenly Mountain Resort’s security manager.

Joining Maugeri at B&B's June 21 dinner were Damian Lanum, Nicholas Corbridge, Nathan Castellanos (all security supervisors) and Frank Papandrea, environmental manager at Heavenly Mountain Resort.

These five AAD sponsor volunteers from Heavenly did a great job of helping the B&B volunteers put on a great spread for our 105 dinner guests for the evening. From bagging give away bags to drying dishes, to working the serving line, to stacking tables and chairs, Heavenly's volunteers cheerfully and enthusiastically worked side by side with B&B volunteers throughout the evening.

The Bread & Broth program will soon be celebrating their 25th anniversary of providing meals to the needy in the Lake Tahoe South Shore community at St. Theresa Church Grace hall and over five years at the Lake Tahoe Community Presbyterian Church. B&B would like to thank Heavenly Mountain Resort and the Vail Echo Grant Program for their long time financial support and their employees' active participation at Heavenly's sponsorship dinners.

To help B&B as a donor or sponsor, contact meat 530.542.2876 or carolsgerard@aol.com.

Carol Gerard, Bread & Broth