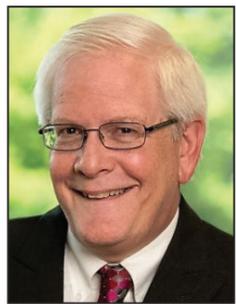


Opinion

ABC's (and D) of Medicare: Let a professional handle the parts

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

I never knew how popular I was until I became eligible for Medicare.



Grubaugh

Insurance companies I never dealt with wanted my business, and it's easy to see why: With the fast-growing older population at the center of so much, a lot of money stands to be made.

After slogging through the mess for many weeks, I consulted a professional. It turned out to be a smart move, and I would advise anyone in the same boat to do the same thing.

Medicare is comprised of four components. Part A covers hospitalization, and Part B covers doctor visits and outpatient care. Part A is cost-complimentary (you've been paying into the program all the years you worked). Part B involves a premium based on your income (right now it's

\$148.50 a month if you make less than \$176,000 in your household per year).

Then, there is Part D, which involves prescriptions and for which you need to choose a private insurer. Premiums vary depending upon plan choice.

There are two main routes you can take to get your coverage. The first way basically has you decide which Part D drug plan you want to sign up for and whether you want a supplemental policy to fill in costs that Medicare might not cover. Those gaps, I'm told, can be substantial.

The second route is Medicare Advantage, known as Part C. You select a private sector insurer — an HMO or a PPO — to cover your needs. (Most advantage plans require no additional premium.) All Advantage plans cover Parts A and B and most cover Part D.

In general, your overall annual expense is the monthly Part B premium, plus copays on specialists, and any hospital or procedural copays, capped at a maximum out of pocket.

A variety of considerations factor into which form of Medicare you take and when you take it. For one thing, many of us want to make sure certain doctors and drugs are covered. For another, the amount of coverage you need can be affected by your health or your finances. Yet another, you might already

be covered through an employer and can afford to put off decision making. The subject can quickly get complicated.

I resolved all my issues by reaching out to Derek Schuett, an account executive with First Mid Insurance Group, an independent insurance agency and a subsidiary of First Mid Bancshares. During multiple conversations, he walked me through the sign-up process and the decisions I needed to make.

"We work very hard to simplify an individual's Medicare journey," he told me. Many people are fearful about the entire process, he said, and it's easy to see why.

People covered by work-related health insurance can remain on their employer plan (if it covers 20 or more employees) or opt to switch over to Medicare. I did so because the premiums will be cheaper, and the maximum out-of-pocket cost is about half what I faced under my employer plan. That's not unusual.

Going through the Social Security Administration (you can do it online), you sign up for Medicare in the three months before you turn 65 and up to three months after you turn 65. You can sign up later, but you might have to pay penalties or face higher premiums.

It's smart to lean on a professional who has the know-how. Schuett, for example, says he deals with around 33

prescription drug plans and at least a dozen Advantage plans, and just about every major insurer is included, names like Blue Cross Blue Shield, Humana, Aetna and Mutual of Omaha, to name a few. He is paid by commission not by the client.

Every year there is an open enrollment period during which you can select new Medicare Advantage or Part D drug coverage. That means you can adjust your coverage somewhat for your life circumstances.

I saw recently where U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin has reintroduced a plan calling for Medicare at 50, allowing people from 50 to 64 to buy into Medicare coverage. I can't imagine how that would work but I'm sure it will be the topic of hot debate eventually.

Getting old is hard enough without all the insurance complications. Getting sick and having to pay for it becomes a lot easier when you're Medicare eligible. I worked my entire life to get to the point where I could actually make the move. I overestimated, though, the simplicity of making it, before I consulted a professional.

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Biden's Build Back Better Program prescribes path to America's future

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

Unless you subscribe to Arthur Laffer's bogus Supply Side Economics theory, you realize that government involves



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making choices. You cannot have your cake and eat it, too. Throughout the 2016 presidential campaign, candidate Donald Trump promised a trillion-dollar infrastructure program. Indeed, in his election night victory speech,

he said, "We are going to fix our inner cities and rebuild our highways, bridges, tunnels, airports, schools, hospitals. And we will put millions of our people to work as we rebuild it." But that never happened. Why? Because he and the Republican-led Congress made a different choice. They opted for tax cuts instead of infrastructure.

The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 slashed taxes for the wealthy and large corporations but did little for the average American. According to the Congressional Research Service, the average effective

corporate tax rate was cut in half and some companies, like Amazon, FedEx, GM and IBM actually paid no federal income tax at all in 2018. The TCJA was opposed by most Americans and passed without a single Democrat vote.

Billionaire businessman Warren Buffett noted in a letter to investors that his firm Berkshire Hathaway made more than \$29 billion overnight after the tax cuts. "A large portion of our gain did not come from anything we accomplished at Berkshire," he wrote.

The top 1 percent of taxpayers received an average tax reduction of \$50,000. The bottom saw a mere \$645. As Trump told some of his rich buddies at Mar-a-Lago after signing the legislation, "You all just got a lot richer."

Supply-Side, nee Trickle-Down, Economic theory preaches that such tax cuts spur investment and job creation so that everyone benefits and the government actually receives more tax revenue than before — but that's just not true. In the two years after passage of the TCJA, GDP growth, the job creation rate and the business formation rate remained about the same as previously. Meanwhile, the deficit ballooned to \$1 trillion per year.

So, there was no wonderful infrastructure program. We didn't "fix our inner cities and rebuild our highways,

bridges, tunnels, airports, schools, hospitals." They never even drafted an infrastructure bill much less bring one up for a vote. Trump and the Republican Congress chose tax cuts instead.

Now, we can choose a different path. If we raise the corporate tax rate to 28 percent, close tax dodges favored by large corporations, and raise taxes on wealthy individuals via modifications to income, estate and capital gains assessments, we can fund President Joe Biden's Build Back Better program.

The BBB is composed of two parts: the American Jobs Plan, investing in physical infrastructure, and the American Families Plan, breaking down barriers to employment and building a path to upward mobility for middle class individuals and families.

The American Jobs Plan would:

- Rebuild our roads, bridges, public transit, rail, ports, waterways, and airports;
- Build, renovate and retrofit more than two million homes and housing units;
- Upgrade our research infrastructure and establish the U.S. as a leader in climate science, innovation and research and development;
- Rebuild the country's water infrastructure, replacing all of the nation's lead pipes and upgrade the country's drinking

water, wastewater and stormwater systems;

- Build new public schools, upgrade existing buildings with better ventilation systems, and update technology labs; and
- Build a high-speed broadband infrastructure to reach complete coverage across the nation.

The American Family Plan recognizes that education is the key to successfully competing in the global marketplace of the 21st century. It would make early childhood education universal and community college education free. And it would support families by extending the child tax credit, the earned income credit and the child and dependent care credit. It would also continue the expanded health insurance tax credits under the Affordable Care Act.

Since the passage of the TCJA four years ago, the rich got richer and the nation's wealth became more consolidated. The cost of that was not just the trillion-dollar deficit but the neglect of the infrastructure repairs and improvements needed to keep America on top. It doesn't need to be that way. We can choose a different path.

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