

THE STAR TRIBUNE'S OPINION PAGES

Opinion

An inside look at our work and how you can contribute.

The editorial page

The Editorial Board is committed to hosting a civil and informed debate on the issues that matter most to the Star Tribune's readers.

One of the ways we get the conversation started is to provide our own views in the form of editorials, which represent the institutional view of the Star Tribune.

Editorial Board members offer their ideas at regular staff meetings. Some of those ideas come in response to news coverage, while others may come from sources they've developed in their areas of expertise or from one of the many meetings the board holds with community leaders, politicians, government officials and citizens' groups.

Board members discuss whether topics are worthy, how the editorial might be argued and what reporting will be needed to develop an informed opinion.

There's sometimes disagreement about the direction an editorial should take, and in those cases, the editorial page editor makes the call.

In most cases, the board reaches a consensus on the opinion, and a board member is assigned to do additional reporting and writing.

Editorials do not have a byline or credit line because the author writes on behalf of the board and may or may not agree in full with the opinion expressed.

The Editorial Board operates independently from the newsroom, meaning that news reporters and editors are not involved in determining the board's positions. At election time, for example, newsroom staff members learn about the board's endorsements at the same time readers do — when they're published.

The best editorials make a difference in the community by provoking a healthy debate and by influencing public affairs in ways the Editorial Board believes will benefit Minnesotans today and in the future. It's a responsibility we take seriously, knowing that ultimately our readers will determine if our opinions are valuable.

Editorials

EpiPen price gouging shouldn't surprise

This week's furor over the skyrocketing cost of the EpiPen — a life-saving shot for those with severe food and bee-sting allergies — brought to mind the results of an 18-month investigation trumpeted late last year by U.S. senators.

Grassley-Snowden Investigation Finds Revenue-Driven Pricing Strategy Behind \$84,000 Hepatitis Drug, read the news release issued by Sens. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, who are members of the Senate Finance Committee. The concept that a big pharmaceutical company — in this case, Sovaldi's manufacturer, Gilead Sciences — was "maximizing revenue" apparently came as a shock to these two health care policymakers.

It's remarkable it took a year and a half to reach this conclusion. The pharmaceutical industry regularly ranks among the world's most profitable, with the largest firms routinely posting double-digit margins. In 2013, for example, Pfizer Inc. reported a staggering 42 percent profit. Access and affordability have long been low-priority items on a CEO's agenda.

So the newly revealed price-gouging by EpiPen manufacturer Mylan Inc., and the greed from its politically connected CEO Heather Resch, is contemptible but not surprising. For the quarter-century that this nation has debated health care reform, there's been widespread consensus not only around "market-driven health care" but the need to protect drugmakers' profits in the name of innovation. Resch is the daughter of Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va.

The results system that encourages drugmakers to set prices at what ever the American market bears. In contrast with most other countries, the United States does not employ a form of drug price regulation to control spending on pharmaceuticals, according to a 2010 American Journal of Public Health article. Instead, the government protects a brand-name drug's market exclusivity against generic competitors. It also fails to wield its immense purchasing power, such as by negotiating lower drug prices through the Medicare program for seniors.

Predictably, Americans' per capita spending on prescription drugs exceeds the rest of the world's, according to an Aug. 23 article in the Journal of the American Medical Association. On average, the "list prices" for the top 20 highest-revenue-grossing drugs — are 3 times greater in the United States than the United Kingdom's, the authors noted. It is any wonder that the \$500 increase in EpiPen pricing followed last year's scandal: the price hike masterminded by "Pharma Bro" Martin Shkreia for a drug often taken by AIDS patients. Without change, another scandal will erupt next year. Consumers with high-deductible health insurance or no insurance will again feel the pinch. Taxpayer-funded health care programs also will continue to pay top dollar and continue to strain government budgets.

As with anything in health care, fixes are complex. U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar has smartly called for the Federal Trade Commission to investigate potential activity by Mylan in limiting EpiPen competition. The Minnesota Democrat also merits praise for two long-standing public legislation that would allow Americans to import lower-cost versions from Canada and another bill that would speed generic versions of brand-name drugs to market.

These measures have lingered in congressional limbo due in part to the pharmaceutical industry's lobbying might. But reluctance is also tied to a valid need to protect innovation. Developing new drugs and bringing them to market does indeed require massive amounts of money. The profit incentive encourages companies to take the associated risks.

Still, some academic analyses dispute that today's high-drug prices are justified by research costs. Mylan, for example, appears to have prioritized payouts for Resch and other executives as profits rolled in from the old but reliable drug used in EpiPens. Policy-makers calling for solutions after the EpiPen outrage are to be commended, but they also need to strike a very careful balance.

FROM AN EDITORIAL WRITER WHO IS CURRENTLY ON VACATION

FROM THE WASHINGTON POST

Readers Write

Letters represent the institutional voice of the Star Tribune. They are researched and written by the Editorial Department, which is independent of the newsroom.

With balance, win outstate support

Those who wildly support Gov. Mark Dayton's obsession with Southwest light rail would like to blame opposition on the House majority. But consider other rail issues for perspective. "Zip Rail" — a high-speed line between the Twin Cities and Rochester — also was opposed, especially in Goodhue County where it would have sliced through farm country without even stopping. The project died under a blanket of grass roots opposition. We hear stories that many NIMBY people in upscale neighborhoods around Lake of the Isles also vehemently resist Southwest light rail and its high cost.

Lakota County opted not to have any uncommenced light rail but has opted for the Cedar Avenue busway public transit alternative. Also consider that a recent \$42 million rail upgrade from Northfield in Rice County to Randolph in Dakota County serves a new unit train grain loading facility. An 11-mile rebuild of the railroad north from Randolph to the Pine Bend refinery could create a nearly straight rail route from Owatonna to Northfield, Randolph, Pine Bend and on to St. Paul. Such enhancements of existing rails to support light rail passenger service and freight service that supports job growth could well attract Republican support in the Legislature from outstate.

Meanwhile, it is clearly entirely the intransigence of Dayton and the DFL Senate majority holding a bonding session hostage to pouring money into a Southeast line that gives no benefits to citizens outstate is a problem that will not help the DFL on Nov. 8.

DOUG JONES, Newstead, Minn.

In an Aug. 19 editorial counterpart ("The transit impasse," truth be told, has Minnesota acting like a heart), Eric Knapp says that "all advocates have been unable to point to any measurable impact on congestion in the metro area as a result of the billions already being spent on rail."

This is of course, an ill-defined metric. The value in light rail is that it facilitates a new kind of population growth and development. The value in light rail is that it facilitates a new kind of population growth and development. The value in light rail is that it facilitates a new kind of population growth and development.

OLYMPIC ATHLETES Tax break? I call foul

State Rep. Pat Gundala, R-Farmington, plans to introduce a bill to exempt our Olympic athletes from income taxes on the money they earn participating in the Games. The bill would exempt Olympic athletes completely voluntarily. Yes, they represent the U.S. But also themselves. If successful, they can almost entirely expect to benefit with accolades and endorsement money. They do not need the bill to be given special treatment for their Olympic athletes. Their service is no greater than mine.

TRADE AND IMMIGRATION Sorry, but we know Trump

Michael Priddy Arthur needed just one more small piece of research for his Aug. 22 article on why progressives who want to block Donald Trump's "ban on Muslims" should consider Donald Trump. Ironically, Arthur writes in what he thinks is a clever close to his piece: "Instead of writing a Republican outside the rally, I went to a Trump rally and out of Trump rallies with Trumpers showing them, screaming their epithets and spitting at them."

YOUR VIEW? We welcome your participation in these pages, whether in letters to the "Readers Write" section or comments for the "Opinion Exchange" page.

Letters should be no longer than 100 words. Submissions must include a return address, occupation and phone number. Letters and editorials must include the name of the Star Tribune and be published in any format. Letters should be held up to 250 words. Articles should be fewer than 700 words.

YOUR VIEWS? Here's how you can reach the Editorial Department • E-mail: opinion@startribune.com • Phone: 612-673-4823 • Post: 650 3rd Av. S., Suite 1300, Minneapolis, MN 55408

Cartoons

Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Steve Sack has entertained, informed and provoked Star Tribune opinion section readers since 1981. Steve's style is unique, and his point of view is clear. He can be laugh-out-loud funny one day and sadly reflective the next. He typically does five cartoons a week, and his year-end "Best of Sack" remains one of our most popular annual features. On days when Steve's work does not appear, the Star Tribune chooses from a variety of nationally syndicated cartoons. Steve is, first and foremost, a journalist, and he takes his craft seriously. He reads and watches the news with the eye of a reporter, and his cartoons reflect his thorough understanding of complex people and issues. Even those who disagree with Steve's take often admit to being loyal followers. Steve's many honors include winning the 2013 Pulitzer in editorial cartooning, and being a Pulitzer finalist in 2004 and again in 2016.



Social media

Get the latest links to cartoons from Pulitzer Prize-winner Steve Sack as well as editorials and commentary by following @StribOpinion on Twitter. Or you can like Star Tribune Opinion at facebook.com/StribOpinion. Also look for StribOpinion on Instagram and Pinterest.

Podcast

Listen to our weekly "Playing Politics" podcast, produced in collaboration with WCCO Radio, for in-depth analysis of public affairs in Minnesota. Co-hosts John Williams from WCCO and John Rash from the Star Tribune are joined by members of the Star Tribune Editorial Board in a timely, opinionated discussion of the political news of the week. You'll find current and archived podcasts at startribune.com/playingpolitics, and you can subscribe through iTunes and Google Play.