

NY Attorney General tackles medical rate manipulation

By KATY MANTYK
Epoch Times Staff

NEW YORK—New York Attorney General Andrew M. Cuomo on Tuesday announced historic reform of the nationwide health care reimbursement system that will end price manipulation by big insurance companies.

"This will lead to consumers getting what they paid for," Attorney General Cuomo explained to the press on Tuesday.

Cuomo has reached an agreement with UnitedHealthGroup Inc., the nation's second largest health insurer, after conducting an industry-wide investigation into a scheme to defraud consumers by manipulating reimbursement rates.

At the center of the scheme is Ingenix, Inc., a wholly-owned subsidiary of United, which is the nation's largest provider of health care billing information. Under the agreement with United, the database of billing information operated by Ingenix will close. United will pay \$50 million to a qualified nonprofit organization (yet to be chosen) that will establish a new, independent database to help determine fair out-of-network reimbursement rates for consumers throughout the United States.

"For the past ten years, American patients have suffered from unfair reimbursements for critical medical services due to a conflict-ridden system that has been owned, operated, and manipulated by the health insurance industry. This agreement marks the end of that flawed system," said Attorney General Cuomo.

"During these tough economic times, this agreement will keep hundreds of millions of dollars in the pockets of over one hundred million Americans."

In February, 2008, Cuomo announced an industry-wide investigation into allegations that health insurers unfairly saddle consumers with too much of the cost of out-of-network health care.

Seventy percent of insured working Americans pay higher premiums for insurances plans that allow them to use out-of-network doctors. In exchange, insurers often promise to cover up to eighty percent of the "usual and customary" rate of the out-of-network expenses, and consumers are responsible for paying the balance of the bill.

United and the largest health



REFORMING HEALTH CARE: Attorney General Andrew Cuomo announced on Tuesday nationwide health care reform, ending the practice of manipulating medical rates to overcharge patients.

KATY MANTYK/THE EPOCH TIMES

insurers in the country rely on the United-owned Ingenix's database to determine their "usual and customary" rates. The Ingenix database uses the insurer's billing information to calculate "usual and customary" rates for individual claims by assessing how much the same, or similar, medical services would typically cost, generally taking into account the type of service and geographical location. Under this system, insurers control reimbursement rates that are supposed to fairly reflect the market.

Attorney General Cuomo's investigation concerned allegations that the Ingenix database intentionally skewed "usual and customary" rates downward through faulty data collection, poor pooling procedures, and the lack of audits. That means many consumers were forced to pay more than they

should have, ranging from 10 to 28 percent across the state.

The investigation found that having the health insurer determine the "usual and customary" rate—a large portion of which the insurer then reimburses—creates an incentive for the insurer to manipulate the rate downward.

The creation of a new database, independently maintained by a nonprofit organization, is designed to remove this conflict of interest.

In February 2008, Cuomo also announced that he had issued subpoenas to the nation's largest health insurance companies that use the Ingenix database, including Aetna, CIGNA, and WellPoint/Empire BlueCross BlueShield. The Attorney General's industry-wide investigation is ongoing.

"Our agreement with United removes the conflicts of interest that

have been inherent in the consumer reimbursement system. This has been an industry-wide problem, and it demands an industry-wide reform," said Cuomo. "We commend United for leading the industry on this issue."

Representatives from United and from leading medical and consumer organizations joined Cuomo in making the announcement at the Saint Vincent Catholic Medical Centre in Manhattan on Tuesday.

"We are committed to increasing the amount of useful information available in the health care marketplace so that people can make informed decisions," said Thomas L. Strickland, Executive Vice President and Chief Legal Officer of UnitedHealth Group. "We are pleased that a not-for-profit entity will play this important role for the marketplace."

Chinese scholars call for boycott of TV propaganda

By XIN FEI
Epoch Times Staff

Twenty-two Chinese scholars published an open letter on January 12 to announce their determination to boycott China Central Television (CCTV), China's largest official television broadcaster, in protest of its role in state-sponsored propaganda.

The open letter was initiated by Beijing writer Ling Cangzhou, scholar Wen Kejian, and attorney Tang Jitian. In the letter, they call for a boycott of CCTV for its information monopoly as well as its use in brainwashing programs. The initiators said they hope the letter can raise public awareness of the necessity to refute lies contained in CCTV's programs.

The boycott action includes refusing to watch or spread CCTV's news and propaganda or to browse its website.

In an interview with The Epoch Times, Ling Cangzhou said he could not tolerate the CCTV's monopoly of media resources and its disregard for public welfare. A recent example, Ling said, was the CCTV's endorsement for melamine contaminated Sanlu Milk Powder in its news programs.

The scholars also criticized the CCTV's censorship and biased reports. They pointed out that the CCTV has been reporting only news that flatter authorities, while remaining silent on disasters and social conflicts. When reporting international news, on the other hand, CCTV reports always suffer from a decidedly negative bias, the scholars said.

Other than its news programs, scholars said the most abominable CCTV production is its "Spring Festival Gala," an official show consisting of mostly singing and

The boycott action includes refusing to watch or spread CCTV's news and propaganda or to browse its website

dancing to celebrate the Chinese New Year.

"The show is nothing but a huge political brainwashing propaganda event," Wen Kejian said. "Every program of the show is strictly inspected for 'political correctness.'" Tang Jitian also said the show veils China's real situations and distorts China's traditional culture.

When mentioning CCTV's employees, Wen said many people he knows are very professional, but under the current system their talents have been used to create and spread lies.

Tang Jitian reminded CCTV employees that their behaviour is against China's Constitution, and wished they could follow their conscience and stop assisting CCTV in its brainwashing of the Chinese people.

Satellite company fails to defend accusations in European Parliament

By EVAN MANTYK
Epoch Times Staff

Amid accusations that they caved to pressure from the Chinese communist regime, France-based satellite company Eutelsat has turned down a chance to explain itself in front of the European Parliament. Eutelsat Chairman Giuliano Berretta was invited last month by five Members of European Parliament (MEPs) to discuss the company's termination of an independent Chinese-language television network's broadcast into China.

In a letter dated Dec. 23, the Director of Strategy and Institutional Relations of Eutelsat turned down the invitation on behalf of Berretta.

"Unfortunately, considering the date of the plenary session and the commitments already planned, Mr. Berretta won't be able to come to Strasbourg in January," reads the letter.

Eutelsat terminated broadcast of New Tang Dynasty Television (NTDTV) into China in June, 2008, citing technical reasons. A July 10 investigative report by Reporters Without Borders revealed, however, that the broadcast cut was a premeditated act, owing to influence from the Chinese regime ahead of the Beijing Olympics.

MEPs are reading Berretta's refusal to meet as further evidence that Eutelsat has something to hide.

"It's obvious that he's afraid to come. He's afraid to come and face the Members of Parliament because there is no explanation for closing the signal [into China]



New Tang Dynasty TV (NTDTV), an international television network, has distinguished itself for its hard-hitting coverage of mainland China's communist regime. NTDTV

and that is obvious," said Hanna Foltyn-Kubicka, one of the MEPs who sent the letter to Berretta, through a translator.

"I would like to ask [Berretta] how could it happen that a democratic country like France does not respect the basic rights for freedom and for information," said Foltyn-Kubicka.

Marco Cappato, another MEP who sent the letter, said that the fundamental question has not been answered.

"It is very important that we receive a concrete response from

Eutelsat... the one needed should allow NTDTV to be back broadcasting," said Cappato.

"Information is the basic tool not just for human rights activists or people that are asking for freedom of religion or culture or thought, it's simply the basic element of democracy and civil society," he said.

Reports from Reporters Without Borders have shown that Eutelsat's current claim that it does not have space on its W5 satellite for NTDTV is not accurate.

"There is plenty of spare capacity

on Eutelsat's Satellite W5, particularly since the US Broadcast Board of Governors has withdrawn from it, for instance. Voice of America left Satellite W5 as of August 1, leaving excess capacity available," said MEP Bart Staes. "The fact is, they're giving in to pressure from the Chinese communist regime."

Eutelsat's "credibility is at stake and we urge its shareholders to intervene as quickly as possible so that NTDTV can resume broadcasting on this satellite," said Reporters Without Borders.

A written declaration currently circulating among the European Parliament urges Eutelsat to resume NTDTV transmission to China and calls on EP Member States to take "necessary action to help restore NTDTV's broadcasts to China and to support access to uncensored information for millions of Chinese citizens."

Ahead of the January session of the EP, the declaration penned in October already has 315 signers from the 785 MEPs. If a majority of members signs the declaration, it automatically becomes a passed resolution and is read by the EP President at the next session, a strong message to Eutelsat and a victory for China's surging human rights movement.

MEPs have pointed out three areas of pressing concern for human rights in China, including the persecution of the Falun Gong spiritual group and the suppression of rights in Tibet. The third area is the Chinese regime's "organ harvesting," the name for the fatal removal and sale of organs from death row prisoners and from Falun Gong practitioners held for their beliefs.



Slovak Economy Minister Lubomir Jahnotek (R) talks with Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico during a press conference on January 13, 2009 in Bratislava. SAMUEL KUBAN/WAFP/GETTY IMAGES

Slovakia postpones nuclear plant restart amidst gas crisis

By PETER SEDIK
Epoch Times Staff

BRATISLAVA, Slovakia—Earlier this week, the Slovakian government postponed a final decision about restarting the controversial Jaslovské Bohunice nuclear power plant.

Prime Minister Robert Fico had previously announced the intention to restart the VI reactor out of fears his country could be left in a total blackout due to the failure of the Russian gas supply.

The reactor was forced to shut down on Dec. 31, 2008, as part of the terms for Slovakia's entry to the European Union agreed on back in 2004. Re-launch preparations started after the government declared a state of emergency, saying that the gas shortage could cause a collapse of the electricity system. Premier Fico's decision had been criticized by some European countries, especially neighbouring Austria.

Together with other countries in the Balkans, Slovakia is one of the most troubled by the current gas shortage crisis, since 98% of its natural gas deliveries came from the former Soviet Union. After Ukraine and Russia could not agree on gas prices in 2009, the dispute quickly developed to a total halt of Russian

Re-launch preparations started after the government declared a state of emergency

gas to Europe. Under current conditions, Slovakia's gas supplies will last for about another twelve days, while around 1,000 companies were already forced to operate under restrictions to save resources.

The Slovakian and Bulgarian Prime Ministers are meeting with Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Jan 14, in hopes of solving the crisis.