



## **Half Truths and Journalistic Advocacy**

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By John Colyandro and Michael Quinn Sullivan

While the line between activist journalism and issue advocacy has always been a thin one, the Dallas Morning News' publisher crossed it February 2, 2009, by urging in a letter to lawmakers that the Legislature take action against public-private partnerships. The evidence? Misleading and inaccurate stories printed in his own newspaper.

While neither Mr. Moroney nor the Dallas Morning News is registered to lobby, Mr. Moroney, acting in his capacity as publisher of the newspaper, used his corporate resources to compile a "record" that supported his opposition to public-private partnerships. He used the stories as a basis to lobby for state welfare spending hikes, and, ironically, further restrictions on campaign contributions even though they are a manifestation of First Amendment rights.

Mr. Moroney and his writers ascribe all blame in the failures of the delivery of health services to outsourcing and the private entities contracted by the state – and none to the state agencies charged with implementation of the programs. The factual inaccuracies in the reporting are as glaring as what was ignored.

For example, in alleging malfeasance on the part of a managed care company serving the Dallas area, the report, "State of Neglect", cites three instances of "delayed or denied dental care" and alleges that hundreds more exist. Medicaid regulations, however, explicitly state that dental care is not a Medicaid benefit (with limited exceptions under some waiver programs).

The Texas Medicaid Provider Manual, Section 36.5.1.1, states: "Reimbursement for general dental services by any provider, irrespective of the medical or dental qualifications of the provider, is not a Medicaid benefit for Medicaid clients 21 years of age or older. [But the agency] may allow an exception for a dental condition causally related to a life-threatening medical condition."

The provider could not provide dental care unless the state agency cleared it. Was the agency asked? Did the agency deny care? Was the delay in providing dental care to the individuals in the story the responsibility of the state or federal government? Based on the article, those critical questions are left unexplored.

The articles, and by extension Mr. Moroney's letter, strongly implies that managed care providers lobbied for the passage of the integrated care management system that is the subject of the current controversy. They did not.

The witness list for the House Public Health Committee on March 23, 2005, shows three major managed-care companies testified against the integrated care management system.

None of the lobbyists mentioned in the Dallas Morning News articles testified on, for, or against the integrated care management system, while the managed care providers mentioned all testified against the bill.

Left unexplored in Mr. Moroney's advocacy letter and the Morning News story is whether the interest groups that actually lobbied for the integrated care management system actually made a policy error and share a portion of the blame.

If the system advocated by Parkland Health and Hospital System and other organizations was flawed in its concept and oversight by the relevant state agency lacking, how can only the private companies be solely responsible for failure in implementation?

The point is not to defend the actions of any state contractor: if any contractor fails to live up to its responsibilities then the contractor should be fined or fired. Period.

The real issue with Mr. Moroney's advocacy efforts is that the coverage of outsourcing in the Dallas Morning News is so obviously slanted against the private sector and outsourcing as a policy tool. It omits any critique of the culpability on the part of the state in the mismanagement of contracts, or the state's role in developing flawed models which contribute to the failed delivery of services. Furthermore, the series ignores a long history of significant mistakes and crimes that have been committed by the public sector.

While Mr. Moroney insists that reports in the Dallas Morning News "offer valuable insights into problems that cry out for solution," his letter demands no similar reforms to State Schools. Never mind that a federal investigation found "systemic deficiencies" throughout the 13 schools housing nearly 5,000 residents, and that 53 residents died preventable deaths due to "lapses in care."

Furthermore, Mr. Moroney's letter gives no attention to the systemic abuses at the Dallas Independent School District, where employees have broken federal and state laws by forging Social Security Numbers. So why is there no call for increased oversight of DISD in Mr. Moroney's letter?

The Dallas Morning News is supposed to be guided by the principles set forth by its founder, George Bannerman, who built the paper "upon the rock of truth and righteousness, conducting it always upon the lines of fairness and integrity, and acknowledging the right of the people to get from the newspaper both sides of every important question."

In presenting one-sided, misleading arguments, Mr. Moroney's advocacy falls far short of those ideals. And the pursuit of truth and public integrity falls victim.

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