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GREAT WASTE IN THE GREAT LAKES

Hazards of plastics becoming more clear

Can linger in people, animals, studies show, but regulation far off

By Michael Hawthorne
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

As people age, cholesterol and fat gradually clog the walls of two large arteries carrying oxygen-rich blood to the brain.

Over time, depending on a person's diet and other lifestyle choices, the carotid arteries can narrow to the point surgeons intervene by scraping out calcified gunk, called plaque, to reduce the risk of stroke and other diseases.

Reporting for this story was supported by the Pulitzer Center's StoryReach U.S. initiative.

It turns out tiny bits of plastics pollution accumulated during this hardening of the arteries might increase the probability of future health problems.

Out of more than 300 patients who had their neck arteries scoured, Italian researchers reported, those with higher levels of plastics-laden plaque were more likely to suffer strokes, heart attacks or sudden death during the next three years.

The 2024 study, published in the prestigious New England Journal of Medicine, is among a growing amount of human and animal research suggesting plastics pose health hazards that only now are coming into focus.

Scientists are particularly concerned about microplastics, bits no larger than a grain of rice that could trigger heart and brain diseases and other ailments, either by their mere presence in people or from toxic chemicals leaching out of the particles.

Tinier fragments — nanoplastics — are 1/10th the diameter of a human hair. They might be even

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Case manager Louise Joseph, left, speaks to pulmonary and critical care physician Dr. Rakesh Salgia at Roseland Community Hospital on May 19. **JOSH BOLAND/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Safety net hospital debt ignites debate

Illinois medical centers owe the state more than \$700M, sparking questions and calls for change

By Lisa Schencker
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

When West Suburban Medical Center closed in March, it didn't just leave patients in a lurch; it also left the state high and dry.

Around the time of its closure, the Oak Park hospital owed the state more than \$51 million in taxes and penalties, along with \$20 million that the state had advanced to help stabilize West Suburban and its sister facility, Weiss Memorial Hospital in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood.

Now that both hospitals are shuttered, it's unclear whether the state will get those dollars back

— a situation that has intensified debate among Illinois politicians and hospital leaders about how much taxpayer money the state should spend to help safety net hospitals, especially if those hospitals might not pay the state back or are poorly rated.

It's a debate that strikes at the heart of how healthcare is funded and delivered in Illinois, with implications for patients across the Chicago area. Gov. JB Pritzker signed a bill into law this week aiming to address some of the issues, but concerns persist.

Across Illinois, 19 hospitals — mostly safety net hospitals like West Suburban and Weiss — owed

the state nearly \$705 million in taxes, penalties and advance payments, as of earlier this year, according to information obtained from the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services through Freedom of Information Act requests.

"It's really pretty alarming on a lot of fronts, the total dollar amounts involved," Sen. Chapin Rose, the chief budget negotiator for Illinois Senate Republicans, told the Tribune, emphasizing the need for more transparency and rules. "We keep underwriting hospitals that are literally going out of business and the taxpayers are left holding the bag."

Safety net hospital leaders, however, say the debts are symptomatic of the challenges they face in serving vulnerable communities that rely on the facilities for care and employment.

Patients say they depend on the hospitals to keep them healthy.

Patient Mary Anne Cruet said she trusts Humboldt Park Health — a safety net hospital that owed the state more than \$6.2 million as of earlier this year — with her life. She's continued to travel to the hospital for monthly infusions even after she moved away from Humboldt Park about two

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INSIDE



BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

A presidential ceremony, in images

Former President Barack Obama stands during the dedication ceremony of the Obama Presidential Center on Thursday in Chicago's Jackson Park. **Photographs from the day on Page A6**

Trump threatens tolls on strait

A tentative peace deal with Iran teeters as Israel continues attacks in Lebanon, prompting Tehran to close the Strait of Hormuz and President Trump to retort with a threat. **Nation & World, Page B5**

Afghan cherishing the American dream

Interpreter spent 13 years waiting for the US to keep its word

By Tess Kenny
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Abdulhaq Sodais wears an easy smile. He smiles when he talks about where he's explored since moving to the Chicago area. He smiles when his wife shares how well she's doing in her English lessons, when he sits down to a home-cooked spread of Afghan dishes, and when he talks about his friend and former platoon leader.

After more than a decade of waiting and grief, even the flash of a grin is a testament to how much Sodais cherishes his American dream despite having every reason to feel angry or afraid.

Sodais is an Afghan immigrant and former interpreter for the United States military who — after 13 years of trying to gain entry to the country he fought for — is starting his life anew in Chicago's north suburbs. He made the long-awaited move last December.



Amid an increasingly complex and antagonistic immigration system, his story is one of rare success.

Sodais heard he was approved for entry to the U.S. in February 2025, weeks after President Donald Trump started his second term and took swift aim at immigration — including longstanding

See **SODAIS** on Page A13

Above: Abdulhaq Sodais in the living room of his home in Evanston on May 8. Sodais is a refugee from Afghanistan and former interpreter for the United States military. After 13 years of trying, he was approved for entry into the U.S. in February 2025. He moved in December. **JOSH BOLAND/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

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TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Failed cruise upgrade results in Princess canceling reservation

By Christopher Elliott | KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

I paid \$2,369 for a Panama Canal cruise with Princess Cruises through a travel agent last year. My wife, Norma, and I made a deposit, then paid the final balance one day before the due date. Two days later, I checked my account on the Princess app, and the reservation was gone.

When our travel agent called Princess, a customer service representative told her that we were in default for nonpayment and owed approximately \$2,000 more. Where was this new charge coming from? Nobody at Princess could tell us.

After weeks of calls and emails to Princess representatives, the mystery finally unraveled. Apparently, we were being charged for a "Princess Plus" upgrade that cost \$1,440 — a 62% price increase.

It turns out my wife tried to upgrade us to Princess Plus, an optional add-on package that bundles several onboard amenities into a daily price, through the website. The system returned an error message saying that the purchase didn't go through and instructed her to either contact the travel agent or pay for the upgrade onboard.

We planned to handle it on the ship. Yet somehow, Princess was now treating us as if we'd purchased this upgrade and never paid for it. They canceled our reservation and kept \$1,298 of our money as a cancellation fee.

We don't even care about the cruise anymore. We just want our \$1,298 back.

— Robert Battaglia, Oro Valley, Arizona

A: Princess never should've canceled your reservation. When your final payment went through, your account should've been settled. If the system later discovered a phantom charge that nobody could document or explain, Princess needed to contact you first.

Instead, Princess relied on a billing system that gave conflicting information to different employees. Your travel agent couldn't see the charge. The Princess customer service representative couldn't explain what you supposedly owed. The company's own portal told your wife that the upgrade purchase failed.

Yet somehow, all of this added up to a cancellation and a fee.

When a customer makes a payment by the due date,

and the company's statement shows "no balance due," the burden is on the cruise line to explain any subsequent charges before taking punitive action.

You did a great job of keeping records. A paper trail is essential when you're dealing with any billing dispute. You can appeal any rejection to the executive contacts at Princess that are listed on Elliott.org. A brief, firm email to a manager would've been the next step.

When my advocacy team and I contacted Princess on your behalf, the company directed us to your travel agent.

This is a common deflection in the cruise industry; many cruise lines prefer to have travel agents handle disputes rather than deal

with customers directly. The agency declined to comment, saying that the matter was between you and Princess.

Ultimately, Princess agreed. A full three months after your cancellation, the cruise line refunded \$1,298 to your credit card.

Princess should tell its IT department to fix the billing software. This probably isn't the first time that the cruise line has canceled a reservation because of a system problem — and it surely won't be the last.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.

CELEBRITY TRAVEL

Comic cites importance of respect during trips

By Jae-Ha Kim
TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

In her debut comedy special "Rosalee Mayeux: Model Mom," the former high fashion model-turned-stand-up comic shares stories about her life as a model, actor ("The Lawnmower Man," "Blast from the Past") and mother.

"My first gig was at the World Famous Comedy Store (in West Hollywood) in the famous Belly Room," said Mayeux, who is based in Los Angeles. "It was such an honor, and I had a blast! We had a fire audience, courtesy of one of their resident producers, comedian Jimmy Shin. So it was a very cushy beginning!"

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: Do you have any upcoming trips planned?

A: Yes! Central Valley, California, up to San Francisco this summer. And then North Carolina, Louisiana and Florida in the fall.

Q: What is your favorite vacation destination?

A: San Francisco is my favorite place to eat and hang out with my sons, aside from New Orleans. You'll often find me standing at an outside stall eating local oysters.

Q: Is it challenging meeting your dietary needs on the road?

A: I can always find something I like on any menu anywhere. I stick to a pescatarian diet, so that leaves salads in some places, but feasts from the ocean in others.

Q: What was a trip you took as a child that stands out?

A: Galveston, Texas, where



Rosalee Mayeux said San Francisco is one of her favorite places to eat and hang out with her sons. **STORM SANTOS**

my mom would chase me on the beach. I still have my grandmother's seashell collection all over my home. And another time, my Dad took us to Destin, Florida.

Q: What's the most important thing you've learned from your travels?

A: To be kind to service people who depend on tourism and to respect their land. We are only guests. We are ambassadors of where we come from.

Q: Where are your favorite weekend getaways?

A: I am always wanting more sky, more sand, seeing the sparkling stars and the smells of the wild land. My grandfather was a rice farmer, so my happy place is somewhere I can put my feet in the dirt. It heals and grounds me. The other place I love to weekend is San Francisco, where I get to just hang out with family. It's the sweetest.

Q: If you've ever gone away for the holidays, which was the best trip?

A: One year, my youngest and I took off for Paris to celebrate Christmas Eve (and) booked dinner at the Eiffel Tower. We got lost and walked into Notre Dame for the most beautiful services! We finally arrived at Eiffel and the staff told us people had not shown up for their reservations, so they kept serving us all the extra champagne and desserts. It was snowing, so they gave us snowshoes to walk up on the grates outside on the

restaurant's top floors. It was a spectacular and very fat night! Highly recommend.

Q: What is your best vacation memory?

A: My final modeling assignment was in the Indian Ocean on Île Maurice. There was gunfire as we changed planes in Africa to get there. I thought, "What in the world kind of assignment was this?!" But as we landed on the Île Maurice, it felt worth it. Spectacular beaches, sugar cane fields and fish cooking on a fire on the sand, while the warm waters lapped at our feet. Man's inhumanity to man felt far away, in this spectacular heaven on earth.

Q: What are your five favorite cities?

A: New York, Paris, anywhere in Alaska, San Francisco and New Orleans.

Q: Where would you like to go that you have never been to before?

A: I still have never been to Budapest! And Japan!

Q: When you go away, what are some of your must-have items?

A: Face cream and eye masks! Sleep and hydrate are the name of the game.

Q: What is your guilty pleasure on the road?

A: Lobster, croissants and pasta. Calories don't count on vacations.

For more from the reporter, visit www.jaehakim.com.



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