

Wednesday, November 30, 2011

## Self-Referral Increases Medical Costs

This isn't a surprise -- we've known about this problem for a long time -- the question is why we haven't done something about it:

[Self-referral leads to more negative exams for patients. EurekAlert:](#)

Physicians who have a financial interest in imaging equipment are more likely to refer their patients for potentially unnecessary imaging exams...

"Self-referral," whereby a non-radiologist physician orders imaging exams and directs patients to imaging services in which that physician has a financial interest, is a concerning trend in medicine and a significant driver of healthcare costs. "Self-referred medical imaging has been shown to be an important contributor to escalating medical costs," said Ben E. Paxton, M.D., radiology resident at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, N.C. ...

Between 2000 and 2005, ownership or leasing of MRI equipment by non-radiologists grew by 254 percent, compared to 83 percent among radiologists. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that the proportion of non-radiologists billing for in-office imaging more than doubled from 2000 to 2006. During that same time period, private office imaging utilization rates by non-radiologists who control patient referral grew by 71 percent.

For the study, the researchers set out to determine if utilization of lumbar spine MRI differs, depending on the financial interest of the physician ordering the exam. They reviewed 500 consecutive diagnostic lumbar spine MRI exams ordered by two orthopedic physician groups serving the same community. The first group had financial interest in the MRI equipment used (FI group), and the second had no financial interest in the equipment (NFI group). ...

"Orthopedic surgeons with financial interest in the equipment had a much higher rate of negative lumbar spine MRIs," Dr. Paxton said. "In addition, they were much more likely to order MRI exams on younger patients. This suggests that there is a different clinical threshold for ordering MRI exams in the setting of financial incentivization."

Dr. Paxton added that increased imaging utilization due to self-referral may not yield medically useful information and may place the patient at risk for potential adverse consequences.

"It is important for patients to be aware of the problem of self-referral and to understand the conflict of interest that exists when their doctor orders an imaging exam and then collects money on that imaging exam," he said.

Posted by Mark Thoma on Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 12:42 AM in [Economics](#), [Health Care](#), [Market Failure](#) | [Permalink](#) [Comments \(18\)](#)

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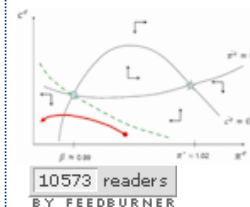
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Professor of Economics  
University of Oregon

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## Comments

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supersaurus said...

according to the OECD, 2009:

number of MRI machines in the US: about 8,000  
number of MRI scans per thousand in the US: 91.2 -> ~27 million scans per year  
average price of MRI scan: I could not pin this down, so call it \$1,000  
cost of tech: ~\$75,000/year ?  
other ongoing costs of operation: call this \$800,000/year, I did not find anything definitive  
cost of radiologist: this is billed out separately

approximate revenue per year per machine: (27,000,000)/(\$1,000) / 8,000) = \$3,375,000

cost of MRI machine and suite: call it \$2.5 million high-end (wikipedia)

even ignoring self-dealing it seems to me these machines are awfully profitable considering the age of the technology and considering that they are not all replaced every other year (more like 7-10 years).

[Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 02:40 AM](#)

save\_the\_rustbelt said in reply to supersaurus...

The collected reimbursement per session is dropping below your estimate, and your costs of operations is too high.

The profitability is dropping steadily over the past 5 or 6 years.

[Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 05:48 AM](#)

supersaurus said in reply to save\_the\_rustbelt...

yes, I was pretty sure \$800k is way high. no matter how you slice it though, for an old and well-understood technology the profit margin is also sky-high. name another large capital investment you might expect to pay off in a year or two.

[Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 01:20 PM](#)

ilsm said...

Non market profits from a medicine insurance cabal are as harmful to the commonwealth as war profite generated by another complex' fake fear.

[Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 03:20 AM](#)

GeorgeK said...

Having been in an eight year medical crisis, I can attest to the validity of this report.

After the first 4 years I started to carry all my CT/MRI/PET scans & X-rays with me to new Dr's visits to keep from having to pay for redundant procedures. Just about every Dr. wanted to have new pictures I would tell them NO.

[Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 04:59 AM](#)

rqayyum@hotmail.com said...

It is very high and unreasonable re-imburement for the technical part of the exam which is forcing not this but many other studies into primary care physician's offices. As long as the profit margin for the technical part of imaging (and other studies) will be high, physicians will find someway to get their share of the pie. Primary care, otherwise, is so poorly re-imbursed, that a primary-care physician who doesn't do these type of gimmicks will likely end-up under poverty line.....and you will find a good number of people (as are on wall street) who are willing to game the system.

Chastened' (8)

Fed Watch: A Bit on the Hawkish Side (8)

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'The Latest ACA Dust-Up Should Not be a Dust-Up' (196)

On Murriner Eccles (15)

'Big-Data Men Rewrite Government's Tired Economic Models' (12)

Links for 10-29-2013 (147)

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Randy on Links for 11-05-2013

ThomasH on Links for 11-07-2013

bakho on Fed Watch: On Lowering the Unemployment Target

ThomasH on Links for 11-07-2013

ThomasH on Links for 11-07-2013

Darrell on Links for 11-07-2013

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Darrell on Links for 11-07-2013

Darrell on Links for 11-07-2013

Randy on Links for 11-05-2013

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reason on 'Ignorance'

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Lafayette on Paul Krugman: Those Depressing Germans

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Onomatopoeia on Links for 11-07-2013

Oupoot on Fed Watch: On Lowering the Unemployment Target

Fred C. Dobbs on Links for 11-06-2013

Fred C. Dobbs on Links for 11-06-2013

John Cummings on 'Free-Floating Inflation Hysteria'

Richard H. Serlin on Links

- Paul Krugman

Pointless Political Punditry - Paul Krugman

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In Public Education, Edge Still Goes to Rich - NYTimes.com

The Federal Reserve's Framework for Monetary Policy - FRB

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Miles Kimball: How the Idea that Intelligence is Genetic Distorted My Life--Even Though I Worked Hard Trying to Get Smarter Anyway

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Ignacio Munyo, Ernesto Talvi: Cooling-off of Latin America

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Daniel Little: Structural realism and social realities?

Aidan Kane: Fishamble's "Guaranteed!" by Colin Murphy on national tour

Gavin Kennedy: Some Notes on Sharing

Chris Blattman: Papers I liked

Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 05:44 AM

save\_the\_rustbelt said...

A couple of things not mentioned here.

Orthopedic groups are beginning to divest full tube MRIs (usually to the local hospital) although extremity MRIs are holding fast especially in sports medicine practices.

Costs are coming down but not as fast as reimbursements.

Radiologists get paid to read every one of those MRIs, although some are being offshored via teleradiology and that pisses off the US radiologists.

Radiologists tend to side with the hospital in grudge matches with the orthopedists.

Any radiologist who thinks unnecessary MRIs are being billed to the government has a responsibility to call the OIG, I have never seen this done.

Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 05:45 AM

Doug said...

Went to the local hot shot sports medicine orthoped for shoulder problem, then on to his radiology lab for a \$900 MRI, back to doctor who glanced at it and said he would schedule surgery for the following week. Took the same MRI to a different doctor who looked at it and declared it was such poor quality he could make nothing of it. Gave me a shot of cortisone and a rehab program and a year later, no problems and no costly surgery and associated problems friends have reported. Lesson learned, always get a second opinion and neutral lab/radiology where possible.

Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 06:57 AM

Dan Nile said...

What's wrong with a negative MRI? Instead of assuming that you probably don't have a tumor, with a (good) MRI you can actually definitively diagnose things without surgery. What's the cost of exploratory surgery or a failure to diagnose?

Instead of reinforcing the artificial scarcity and cost, we should be trying to increase the supply (e.g. ban the regional exclusivity contracts that GE supports). They should become so routine that they become a standard part of a physical.

This study has an obvious defect which is doctors who use MRIs extensively are more likely to buy one for the office. It's like complaining that offices with copiers are more likely to make copies than those who have to make copies across the street.

I know there are unnecessary procedures being billed to insurance including MRIs, but targeting the increase in MRI usage as something to be squashed is Ludditism at best.

Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 08:13 AM

save\_the\_rustbelt said in reply to Dan Nile...

Orthopedic offices are flooded with patients with low back pain with unclear causation.

In many cases x-rays followed by conservative treatment should be the first course of action, the MRI comes later and the surgery comes way later.

In a few cases the MRI and surgery comes earlier.

Negative MRIs, especially in suspected disk cases, are not such bad things (mine was positive but no surgery required for now).

Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 10:23 AM

steve said...

1) This is very old news. Health Affairs has published many papers along these lines. Non-radiologists, this is not just orthopedic docs, who own MRIs claim it is more

for 11-06-2013

Randy on Links for 11-05-2013

DrDick on 'Ignorance'

hix on Links for 11-06-2013

anne on Fed Watch: On Lowering the Unemployment Target

anne on 'Why Doesn't Competition Drive Out Inefficient Health Care Technology?'

anne on 'Why Doesn't Competition Drive Out Inefficient Health Care Technology?'

J on Fed Watch: On Lowering the Unemployment Target

Mark A. Sadowski on 'Free-Floating Inflation Hysteria'

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Brad DeLong

Google's Hal Varian on Economic Value of Google to US Advertisers and Customers: Noted

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Noted for Your Morning Procrastination for November 7, 2013

Pat Kline and Enrico Moretti: People, Places and Public Policy: Noted

Jon Cohn: So you ended up XY instead of XX. Get over yourself: Noted

Paul Krugman: Free-Floating Inflation Hysteria: Noted

Paul Krugman

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Free-Floating Inflation Hysteria

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Andrew: "Marginally significant"

Aidan Kane: Annual Conference of the Economic and Social History Society of Ireland Nov 22nd/23rd 2013

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Seamus Coffey: Italy eyes 'Google Tax' to help fix public finances

Daniel Little: Guest post by Jeroen Van Bouwel: On microfoundations and macrofoundations

Seamus Coffey: EC Autumn Forecast 2013

Miles Kimball: David Beckworth--Monetary Policy at the Zero Lower Bound: 3 Quasi-Natural Experiments

David Glasner: Hawtrey's Good and Bad Trade, Part IX: An Endogenous Cycle

Michael Roberts: Weather, storage and an old climate impact debate

Adam Levitin: QM Isn't "Plain Vanilla"

Triplecrisis: "Sitting on a Sack of Gold": Ecuador's Turn Toward Extractivism

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Kevin O'Rourke: Marketing and academic reputation

Donald: Time to Fix the Budget Process

Seamus Coffey: Work, wages and welfare

Miles Kimball: Don't Believe Anyone Who Claims to Understand the Economics of Obamacare

convenient for patients. When studied, patients getting an office based MRI wait just as long as others. This makes sense if you think about the economics of running a machine. Of note, radiologists are not supposed to, and for the most part cannot, self refer.

2) MRIs have tended to run more towards \$2000-\$3000, but prices are dropping a bit.

3) A big money maker for some of our local docs is the follow up study routine. They order routine yearly MRIs for shoulder pain, back pain, knee pain, etc.

Steve

Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 08:14 AM

**beezer said...**

The profit motive simply does not work well in the health care delivery business. Our profit oriented system has all the familiar tumors; gaming, churning, conflict of interest, increased marketing expense, bloated executive pay, etc. etc.

If we ever needed a socialist system it is here.

Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 08:24 AM

**George2047 said...**

Every American should get a total body MRI at least every 5 years. Now that is preventive medicine for some things. I got one, costs me 2800 out of pocket, which is cheaper than the used to be.

Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 08:41 AM

**Just Someguy said...**

Some of this may be self-dealing, to be sure. But it is also the case that a physician who believes more strongly in the effectiveness of MRI use is also a physician who is more like to push his or her practice to purchase one, and then use it.

What is needed is more research in the efficaciousness of MRI, and better guidance in its use.

Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 10:44 AM

**Lyle said...**

It seems to me that one should ask the physician if he owns a piece of the imaging company, and if so ask for another referral or just say no. Push back just like you should on prescriptions asking if the cheapest option is not ok. At a minimum check which facilities are part of the PPO one may be enrolled in and say you want the referral there. Put your own interest before the physicians.

Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 01:22 PM

**Fred C. Dobbs said...**

Aside from excessive radiation dosages, you can't get past a medical reality that more testing is 'obviously' a good idea (as opposed to \*less\*).

And after that, given our entrepreneurial style of delivering medical care, enterprising doctors understand that it's best to own a piece of the pie.

If it's done less elsewhere, it's a reflection of how 'less entrepreneurial' medicine is elsewhere.

Reply Wednesday, November 30, 2011 at 02:01 PM

**MT said...**

Thank you for the post or share information.

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**Mark Thoma - CBS News**

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**rosserjb@jmu.edu: The Cooch May Win In VA**

**Robert Waldmann: In a generally good post to help a second master of the language (who is a much better writer than Frum who is a much much better writer than I) in the post below.**

**Jason Fletcher, Stephen L. Ross: Peer effects: Friendships and adolescent outcomes**

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**David Silbey: Noooooooo! AAAAAAGHHHH! I CAN'T IMAGINE THIS EVER HAPPENING!**

**Nathalie Martin: ABI To Hold All-Day Program on the Next Big Thing, the Dischargeability of Student Loan Debt**

**Seamus Coffey: From the Statistics Offices**

**John Taylor: Extreme Policies Are a Big Problem, Despite Naysayer**

**Miles Kimball: Banks Now (2008) and Then (1929)**

**Linda Beale: Religious rights, taxes, and corporatism--whose**



It will really helpful to solve my confusion

Medical Transcription Company

Reply Saturday, December 03, 2011 at 03:22 AM

[hipparchia](#) said...

otoh, in japan they have all the evil things we're supposed to hate: doctor-owned hospitals, self-referral, fee for service, humongous utilization rates of hospitalization and technology... and the longest lifespan and much lower spending, both per capita and as % of gdp.

Reply Sunday, December 04, 2011 at 02:29 PM

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The (early) Lunch Wrap

Why don't you slip into  
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like a pro-business city  
state

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Fed wonk special, now  
with Q&A

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When bonds don't trade

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market bubble?

Is Amazon bad for  
publishers?

Chart of the day, sovereign  
precariousness edition

There's no global wine  
shortage

Pedantry and numeracy in  
journalism

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Links 11/7/13

Michael Olenick:  
Obamacare Will Lead  
Me Either to Get  
Divorced or Leave the  
US

Newcastle United FC,  
Bloodhound SSC, Glitz,  
Glam and Police Raids:  
a Last Look at the  
Remarkable Double Life  
of Carbon Neutral  
Investments Limited  
(CNI)

Obama Wants to Cut Social  
Security

Ilargi: Sometimes Humor  
Is The Best Way To Tell  
A Tragic Story

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On Lowering the  
Unemployment Target

A Bit on the Hawkish Side

Worth The Wait?

Kind of a Clown Show

FOMC Minutes Overtaken  
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Credibility on the Line

On Communication

Lower Bound ...and  
Then Lowering the  
Long-Run Inflation  
Target

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Decline of the West,  
Rise of the Rest

ProGrowthLiberal: The  
Economist on the  
Inflation Tax

Econoclast: Accelerating  
Inflation?

David Warsh: Beckoning  
Frontiers

Daniel Little: Causality and  
metaphysics

Gavyn Davies: Abenomics  
One Year On

Miles Kimball: There's One  
Key Difference Between  
Kids Who Excel at Math  
and Those Who Don't

Miles Kimball: John Stuart  
Mill Prefers Preferences  
for Almost Anything  
But Indolence

Daniel Little: Change in  
higher education

Miles Kimball: The True  
Size of Africa, Revisited

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A Fistful of Euros  
A Random Walk  
A Taxing Matter  
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Becker-Posner Blog  
Beezer Notes  
Better Economics  
Bluematter  
Bob Giloth  
Brad DeLong  
Brendan Nyhan  
Bronte Capital  
Bruce Web  
Bubble Meter  
Bubblewrapped  
Business Ethics  
Businomics  
Busy, Busy, Busy  
Cafe Hayek  
Calculated Risk  
Cap Mkts & The Economy  
Capital Chronicle  
Capital Ebbs and Flows  
Capital Gains and Games  
Captain Capitalism  
Carola Binder  
Cassandra Does Tokyo  
CBO Director's Blog  
Ceteris Paribus  
Changing Places  
Cheap Talk  
Chicago Boyz  
China financial markets  
Chris Blattman  
City Economist  
Climate Changes  
Clive Crook  
Coase and Kanelbullar  
Coming Anarchy  
Coming Perfect Storm  
Common Sense Forecasts  
Common Tragedies  
Conceptual Guerilla  
Conglomerate Blog  
Conscience of a Lib  
Consider the Evidence  
Contrarian Investors  
Coordination Problem  
Core Economics  
Coyote Blog  
Creative Class

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## Worthwhile Canadian Initiative

What determines long run private debt/GDP ratios?

Pictures of adverse selection in an insurance market, with and without death spirals

Marriage, Canadian style

Migration and Population Size

What will really old, stupid, and uneducated people do?

On "letting the market set interest rates"

Why do people put stuff that isn't recyclable into the recycling bin?

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## Beat the Press

Billionaires Received 0.00002 Percent of the Budget in Farm Subsidies Since 1995

Senator Mary Landrieu Proposes Government Takeover of Insurance Industry

NYT Endorses Imaginary TPP Deal

It's Per Capita Growth that Matters for Well-Being

It Doesn't Help Obamacare If Heavily Subsidized Healthy Young People Sign Up

Social Security Paid Out 0.006 Percent of Benefits to Dead People

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## Noahpinion

Is default moral? Assorted thoughts

Of Course Monetary Policy is an Asset Swap -- But that Doesn't Make it Any Less Useful

Did nominal interest rates fail to spike during the run on the Franc?

Eugene Fama explained. Kind of. Part 3: Performance measurement

The Republican Brain Dissected

Miles Kimball and Noah Smith on the fallacy of inborn math ability

On Depressions, the Structure of Production & Fiscal Policy

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## Rortybomb

Moved Over

Article on Mass

Creative Destruction  
Credit Writedowns  
Crooked Timber  
Daily Economist  
Dangerous Economist  
Dani Rodrik  
Daniel W. Drezner  
Data Points  
Dave Giles  
David Wesel  
Deirdre McCloskey  
Demand Side Blog  
Demography Matters  
Derivative Dribble  
Diamond Slice  
Digitopoly  
Distributed Republic  
Division of Labour  
Dr. Housing Bubble  
Drinking Is Believing  
Dynamist  
Earth Policy Institute  
Earth-Based Initiative  
ECalgary  
EclectEcon  
Economics  
Ecological Econ  
Ecological Economics  
Ecological Headstand  
Econ Amore  
Econ-Atrocity  
Econbrowser  
EconLog  
Econocator  
EconoChat  
Econometrics Simulations  
Economic Dreams...  
Economic Incubator  
Economic Investigations  
Economic Logic  
Economic Perspectives  
Economic Principals  
Economics - Constant ...  
Economics - Top Ten  
Economics and...  
Economics Intelligence  
Economics Jobs  
Economics News  
Economics of Contempt  
Economics Roundtable  
Economics UK  
Economist Blog  
Economist Mom  
Economix  
EconoMonkey  
Economy Watch  
Economia en Tiempo Real  
EconoSpeak  
Econs. Do It with Models  
EconTech  
EconWeekly  
Effective Demand  
Ekonomi Turk  
Emerginvest  
Emirates Economist  
Employment, Interest...  
Env and Urban Economics  
Environmental Econ  
Eschaton  
Evan Soltas  
Exegesis  
Expected Returns  
Ezra Klein  
Fazit  
Felix Salmon  
Finance Professor  
Financial Guages  
Financial Reform Watch  
Financial Rounds  
Fire Larry Summers  
FP Passport  
Freakonomics  
Free Exchange  
Free Market Mojo  
Frontier Economy  
FT Alphaville  
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Globalisation and the Env  
Gonzaga Macro Blog  
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Greg Mankiw  
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Growthology  
Harvard Forum  
Heavy Lifting  
Hispanic Pundit  
Hist of Econ Playground  
Hot Property  
Housing Bubble  
IMFDirect  
Increasing Returns  
Inflation in the USA  
Information Processing  
Innovation and Growth  
Institute of Knowledge  
Institutional Economics  
Intangible Wealth  
Interfluidity  
International Pol Econ  
InvestorCentric  
Irvine Housing Blog

Incarceration at Jacobin, Plus Some Additional Links

What Should You Know About the Quebec Student Strikes and Occupations?

Does Expansionary Monetary Policy Primarily Benefit Finance and Rentiers?

What Does "Fair Value" Accounting Say About the Government?

Some Links and a Quick Thought on Obamacare's Economic Activity/Inactivity Distinction

How Can Herbert Spencer's 1892 Revisions to his Social Statics Help Us Understand Conservative Opposition to the Individual Mandate?

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## The Baseline Scenario

Parenting

Bad Government Software

A Few Quick Thoughts

Fiscal Madness And Entrepreneurship

Economic Statecraft, Women, and the Federal Reserve

The Wall Street Takeover, Part 2

Starting With Chile

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## Macro and Other

### Market Musings

Why Counterfactual Thinking Is Important

Thoughts for the Weekend

My Supply-Side Senses Are Starting to Tingle

Note to Fed: Get Out in Front of the Potential Debt Crisis.

More on George Bailey, QE, and the Shortage of Safe Assets

What George Bailey Can Teach Us About QE

National Review and AEI: Hotbed of Market Monetarism

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## Greg Mankiw

The Prescient David Cutler

Robert Frank on Casinos

Feldstein on Obamacare

Who knew what when?

Fact-checking The Economist

The Suits/Geeks Divide

The median voter changes his mind

Jagdish Bhagwati  
Jaque al Neoliberalismo  
Jared Bernstein  
jka on economics UK  
John Foster  
John Quiggin  
John Taylor  
Journal of Interest  
Juan Cole  
Keith Hennessey  
Kids Prefer Cheese  
Kip Esquire  
Knowledge Problem  
Laurent Guerby  
Lawrance G. Lux  
Left Coast Outlook  
Liberty Street  
London Banker  
Loren Steffy  
M.G. in Progress  
Macedonomics  
Macro Man  
Macro Musings  
Macroadvisers  
macroblog  
MacroBuddies  
MacroDigest  
Macroeconomic Thought  
MacroMania  
Magic, maths, money  
Mahalanobis  
mainly macro  
Marginal Revolution  
Marginal Utility  
Market Observation  
Market Power  
Market Talk  
MarketBeat  
Marketzz  
Mathematician's View  
Matrix  
Matthew Yglesias  
Maverecon  
Mente fría y ...  
Michael Carliner  
Mikeroeconomics  
Miles Corak  
MIT Sloan  
MIT Sloan  
Models & Agents  
Modulator  
Money and Markets  
Money View  
MTEF  
Multiplier Effect  
MV=PQ  
My Budget 360  
My Finance Times  
My Investors Place  
My Quiet Life  
Naked Capitalism  
Nanopolitan  
NDN  
NEP-DGE Blog  
New Economist  
Newmark's Door  
News N Economics  
Noahpinion  
noiseFromAmeriKa  
Normal Deviate  
Nudges  
Odd Numbers  
OECD Insights  
Off the Charts  
Oligopoly Watch  
One Mint  
One-Handed Economist  
Open Economics  
Oregon Economics Blog  
Organizat and Markets  
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Overcoming Bias  
Owen Zidar  
Oxonomics  
Palgrave Econolog  
Paul Krugman  
Peter Gordon's Blog  
Pharyngula  
Political Economist  
Poor and Stupid  
Praxis  
Principles of Economics  
Profitip  
Progressive Fix  
Prophet Without Profit  
Prose Before...  
Prospects for Develop.  
PSD Blog  
Public Offering  
Pura Economia  
Radio Economics  
Rational Irrationality  
Real Time Economics  
Reality-Based Comm  
Realitybase  
Reflexivity in Finance  
RepoWatch  
RGE - EconoMonitor  
RGE - Global Macro  
RGE - Nouriel Roubini  
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## Robert Reich

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## Angry Bear

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### Economics

[Um, OK no problem!](#)

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[Steven Landsburg](#)  
[Stumbling and Mumbling](#)  
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[UK Bubble](#)  
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[Urbanomics](#)  
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[Zambian Economist](#)  
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Sin Tax vs Income Tax  
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old car models feel like  
when new, fancier  
models come out. You  
know, if cars had  
feelings.  
Is this irony?  
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Environmental and  
Resource Values –  
Third Edition

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Excellence among  
African Leaders  
Will Financial Markets  
Crash Before October  
17, or After?  
Japan's Consumption Tax:  
Take it Slow and Steady  
Protectionist Clouds  
Darken Sunny Forecast  
for Solar Power  
Recent Jobs & Growth  
Numbers: Good or Bad?  
One Recession or Many?  
Double-Dip Downturns  
in Europe  
Does Debt Matter?

---

## Tim Taylor

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The Buy Indian Act  
US Adults Lag in  
Competence: The  
PIACC  
Save the Planet: Drive,  
Don't Walk  
Cash for Clunkers: An  
Autopsy  
A Price/Earnings Ratio  
Blinking Yellow?  
U.S. Manufacturing: Output  
Steady, Jobs Slide  
TARP, Five Years Later

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## Dave Giles

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Panel Data Models  
Some Weekend Reading  
swirl: Learning Statistics &  
R  
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The Future of Statistical  
Sciences Workshop  
Segmented Regression -  
Some (Relatively) Early  
References  
Chris Sims on Bayesianism

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March 6, 2005

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October 2013  
September 2013  
August 2013  
July 2013  
June 2013  
May 2013  
April 2013  
March 2013  
February 2013  
January 2013  
December 2012  
More

---

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Academic Papers  
Animation  
Books  
Budget Deficit  
China  
Conferences  
Development  
Discussion Questions  
Econometrics  
Economics  
Environment  
Equity  
Fed Speeches  
Fed Watch  
Financial System  
Fiscal Policy  
Fiscal Times  
Graphs  
Health Care  
History of Thought  
Housing  
Immigration  
Income Distribution  
India  
Inflation  
International Finance  
International Trade  
Iraq  
Iraq and Afghanistan  
Kenya  
Links  
Macroeconomics  
Market Failure  
Media  
Methodology  
Miscellaneous  
Monetary Policy  
MoneyWatch  
Oil  
Oregon  
Policy  
Politics  
Press  
Productivity  
Reading  
Regulation  
Religion  
Saving  
Science  
Social Insurance  
Social Security  
Sports  
Taxes  
Technology  
Television  
Terrorism  
Travel  
Unemployment  
Unions  
Universities  
University of Oregon  
Video  
Web/Tech  
Weblogs

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Electoral Politics**

**Predicting Versus Modeling**

**The Miracle Of The Elevator**

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In The Ground And  
Hide'**

**Carriage Fees And à La  
Carte**

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read today**

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elephant poaching**

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economy**

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merging. That might  
not be such a bad  
thing.**

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Seattle's mayor, but it  
couldn't stop this Colo.  
project**

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Room, HealthCare.gov's  
launch was chaos**

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Cosmetic Change Will  
Satisfy NSA Critics**

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With the  
Congratulatory Phone  
Call?**

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Comparisons: Fighter  
Jets vs. Postage  
Stamps**

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Might Push for Looser  
Monetary Policy**

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Start Soaring Under Bill  
de Blasio**

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Community Abandons  
the Tea Party**

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Sacramento**

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Movie, Discovers  
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**The Joint Cross Section of Stocks and Options --** by Byeong-Je An, Andrew Ang, Turan G. Bali, Nusret Cakici

**Can Simple Informational Nudges Increase Employee Participation in a 401(k) Plan? --** by Robert L. Clark, Jennifer A. Maki, Melinda Sandler Morrill

**The Impact of Biomedical Knowledge Accumulation on Mortality: A Bibliometric Analysis of Cancer Data --** by Frank R. Lichtenberg

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