

Once more into the COPN breach



By **Dave Ress**
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We kind of suspect Virginia's hospitals aren't channeling Shakespeare and declaiming "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more," now that Anthem, the state's biggest insurer is saying it won't pay for MRIs, CTs and other scans at hospitals but will instead direct patients to outside imaging centers.

But just in case they need a hint about which breach is at issue, here's one from Del. Brenda Pogge, R-Norfolk:

"We're going to face confrontation on COPN," she said during a recent chat with the Daily Press editorial board, referring the state's Certificate of Public Need program, which gives state regulators the power to say whether hospitals, clinics and other health care facilities can open or expand.

"We've been kicking that can down the road for about three years now. Anthem's decision is going to force us to tackle it."

Anthem's view is that using independent centers will cut costs and save patients (and it) money. According to Virginia Health Information, a data service set up by the state, insurers and health care providers, an abdominal CT scan at a hospital can cost more than three times as much as one done at a physician's office; a knee MRI is nearly three times more expensive done at a hospital.

The argument from hospitals is that the COPN program prevents outsiders — read imaging centers, for example — from cherry-picking the most profitable lines of business. Hospitals say the money they earn on some services (cardiology is another) helps subsidize such money-losing but essential services as mental health and OB/GYN, to say nothing of the charity care they provide to people who have no insurance and no other financial resources.

House of Delegates Republicans generally rallied 'round a series of COPN repeal or rollback proposals last year but none made it past the Senate while other died on the House floor or in committee.

A more modest charge in the 2017 session also went nowhere.

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