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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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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

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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