

State-employed couples reap insurance benefits

■ No premiums are paid on health plans for some state employees who are married.

By JOSH KNAUB
Staff writer

State employees married to other state employees have been getting a break on health insurance premiums courtesy of Nebraska taxpayers and against state law, state officials said.

Married couples who both work for the state pay no health insurance premiums.

A state statute requires all employees to contribute 21 percent of premiums to health insurance plans.

Lori McClurg, the director of the state department of administrative services, said on Wednesday some couples have not paid premiums for about 20 years.

She said her department was researching how and why the practice began but that she believed the practice actually saved the state money.

"We have told our employees we would look into this," McClurg said. "Right now we are on that course."

Currently, McClurg said, the state pays more in cases where both the husband and wife are employed by the state than it would for two single employees.

In a conference call Wednesday, Gov. Mike Johanns said he did not understand where the practice had come from.

"State employees shouldn't have substantially better (health insurance) plans than private citizens can afford," Johanns said.

He said he may ask for an attorney general's opinion about the practice.

Greg Clayton, University of Nebraska-Lincoln director of benefits and risk management, said he did not know if the university was covered by the state statute.

He said university operations are sometimes exempt from certain labor policies.

Linda Leake, benefits coordinator, said couples employed by UNL do pay insurance premiums.

Leake said premiums for couples were lower than for individual employees but that the university's contribution

per person was the same.

Chris Peterson, press secretary in the governor's office, said 699 couples, or 1,398 state employees, are in a position to benefit from free premiums.

Of those, 80 couples include one spouse working for a state department and one working for the university.

Charlyne Berens, UNL assistant journalism professor, and her husband, Denny Berens, who works for health and human services, said as far as she knows, in the past they haven't paid premiums.

But Robert Sittig, a retired UNL political science professor, and his wife, Bonnie Sittig, a Nebraska legislative aide, paid a portion of their premiums during the time both were employed by the state.

"I'm perplexed," he said. "This is news to me."

Political science Professor Jeff Spinner-Halev said he and his wife, Elyza Richmon Halev, a former health department employee, also paid during the time both were employed by the state.

"We never looked at the option (of free premiums)," Jeff Spinner-Halev said. "I wasn't even aware this existed."

Post columnist to speak at Joslyn

By KIMBERLY SWEET
Senior staff writer

Washington Post columnist and author David Broder disseminates his opinion weekly in local newspapers such as the Omaha World-Herald and the Lincoln Journal Star.

But tonight, Nebraskans have the opportunity to get Broder's wisdom firsthand instead of reading it on the printed page.

Broder will give the 4th annual Governor's Lecture in the Humanities tonight at the Joslyn Art Museum Witherspoon auditorium in Omaha.

The columnist, who has given political commentary on the shows "Meet the Press," "Inside Politics" and "Washington Week in Review," will give a speech titled "The Press, Politics and Citizenship."

Broder will be of interest to Nebraskans because many are educated on political issues, said John Wunder, University of Nebraska-Lincoln history professor and member of the Nebraska Humanities Council, which is co-sponsoring the event.

Because Nebraska is neighbor to Iowa, which has one of the first presidential primaries, and Nebraska has many high-profile national leaders, Broder will address many issues relevant to the state, Wunder said.

The Governor's lecture is co-sponsored by the Nebraska Humanities Council and the John C. Kenefick Endowed Chair in the Humanities at Creighton University.

The purpose of the lecture is to bring in scholars and national speakers who have a special knowledge of culture, history or the political climate, said Tom Inek, public relations assistant to the council.

The mission of the lecture coincides with the mission of the humanities council, which is to promote a better understanding in humanities-based disciplines.

Past speakers include Ted Sorenson, former special counsel to John F. Kennedy and NU alumnus, and Stephen Ambrose, historian and author.

Tickets are still available for the lecture, which begins at 8 p.m. The cost is \$10 for adults and is free for students with a student ID.

Sally Ride recounts NASA experiences

By CARA PESEK
Staff writer

NEAR ASHLAND - A mission to encourage students to take math and science courses led Sally Ride, America's first woman in space, to the Strategic Air Command Museum on Wednesday.

During a 45-minute presentation, Ride spoke to 230 middle school students from Omaha and Ashland about her experiences as a NASA astronaut.

"I try to transmit the importance of the space program and the value of math and science in this field," Ride told reporters before the presentation.

"It is really important to speak with kids in elementary and middle school because that's the point when they're naturally curious about things," she said.

Because of this, Scott Hazelrigg, SAC museum director, said the museum wanted to give as many students as possible the chance to see Ride.

Ride told the students about her experiences during her two missions on the shuttle Challenger.

Slide depictions of images from the missions gave students an idea of what astronauts are able to see from space.

"According to the game Trivial Pursuit, the only man-made structure you can see from space is the Great Wall of China," Ride said.

A picture taken from Challenger of a space center popped onto the screen.

"Well, they're wrong," she said as she pointed out the runway and various buildings.

She also explained how industries use information collected during a space mission.

The fishing industry, Ride said, uses pictures from space to see where there are high concentrations of phytoplankton, single-celled organisms that fish feed on. Fish are abundant where there are many phytoplankton.

"Even though NASA gets a lot of publicity for sending probes to Mars and the moon, we can also learn a lot about our own planet," Ride said.

After she told the students about her Challenger missions, Ride turned

the program over to the students.

Ride answered questions about how astronauts eat, sleep and dress during missions, about height requirements for astronauts and about how it feels to be weightless.

"Weightlessness is really fun," Ride said. "There's really no other way to explain it. There's no way to simulate it on earth. It's just pure fun."

And of course, she was asked what it was like to be the first woman in space.

"I wanted to go into space for the same reasons as all other astronauts," Ride said.

"It didn't matter that I was the first woman to do it; it was important that I was able to do it."

After speaking to the students, Ride met with ConAgra representatives.

ConAgra sponsored Ride's visit to the SAC museum.

Ride became the first woman in space during the shuttle Challenger's 1983 mission, and followed up with an eight-day mission in 1984, again on Challenger.

She accumulated more than 343 hours in space and was preparing for her third mission when Challenger exploded in 1986.

Ride retired from NASA in 1987 and is now director of the California Space Institute and professor of physics at the University of California, San Diego.

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Tailgate on the TURF

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October 7, 1999 • Memorial Stadium

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Students, faculty and staff are all invited to come to this event starting at 6 p.m. at Memorial Stadium (bring your faculty/staff or student ID).

We'll provide free food to the first 5,000 people through the doors, drawings for door prizes and lots of fun.

The event is a joint effort of the Homecoming Steering Committee and the Athletic Department.

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