Course Description:
Medical care spending is nearly $3 trillion a year in the U.S., accounting for almost one in every six dollars spent in the U.S. economy and growing even before the Affordable Care Act legislation was signed into law three years ago by President Obama. Yet this large and important system is confusing, complex, expensive and difficult to understand.

The goal of this course will be to break down medicine, related science and health care for the average person, writing and communicating about it in an understandable way. In particular, we will spend much of the semester studying, examining the launch of the Affordable Care Act, or what has come to be known as Obamacare.

What is the difference between an ACO and a PPO and how do you write that in a way that people will know whether to buy that plan over an HMO? If a patient is “treatment-naïve” for the HIV virus, why don’t medical researchers simply write that the test results turned up “negative?” Are generics better or worse than brand names? The difference between Medicare and Medicaid is that one plan provides medical benefits to elderly and the other to poor Americans, but most do not even know this because it has never been explained to them effectively.

Because health care is not written and communicated so consumers can understand it, people suffer injuries and even death from medical errors, while doctors and insurance companies that cannot convey their messages in easy-to-understand ways result in a frustrated public at large. All of this costs money and endangers lives.

While learning and being refreshed upon basic writing and information-gathering through instructor handouts, videos, texts, lectures and guest speakers, students will also spend time doing research and interviews necessary to write stories, speeches or memos to help fellow health professionals, businesses and the public at large.

Students will also practice and study how to write and edit across all platforms whether they be print, digital or broadcast outlets. They will learn to write about health care and medical issues in a more understandable, organized and convincing manner. Students will also study the writing of others.

Student goals will be accomplished through lectures, guest speakers, readings and writing assignments. There will be both a mid-term and final writing assignment as well as three or four shorter exercises throughout the semester where students will be asked to conduct interviews or cover events or research topics or presentations for their stories.

Texts
Students should follow, read and watch the news, particularly in the 24 hour period before each class. Read the New York Times health page, as one key example, and my Forbes blog, http://www.forbes.com/sites/brucejapsen/ which you can sign up for by clicking the red “follow-on” segment to the right of my picture on any column. It’s free and you get an e-mail each time you write something. You can also sign up for various news outlets for free or friend them on Facebook or follow them on Twitter. We can do this in class if you are not already using social media.

**Instructor Office Hours**

By appointment but generally available via phone or through our digital classroom by appointment Wednesday afternoons between 2:30 pm and 4:30 pm and Thursday afternoons by appointment between 2 and 4 pm. My schedule is also flexible for other appointments.

**Grading**

Student grades are based on several things that include writing assignments, a midterm and a final project. Grades will be determined in the following manner.

Attendance, participation for in-class work and general engagement: 25 percent
Outside reporting, writing and editing exercises: 35 percent
Midterm reporting and writing assignment: 15 percent
Final reporting and writing project: 25 percent (grade based ½ reporting/interviewing and ½ writing)

**Deadlines:**

Deadlines are **critical** in journalism, public relations and communicating information in today’s digital age. **Late assignments will drop at least one letter grade for each day they are past their deadline.**

Check daily your e-mails and the news item section of our classroom, particularly the morning of class.

In today’s media, developments in the news are reported more frequently than ever. You should be attuned to the latest health and medical science developments.

**Spelling, style and grammar.**

Grades suffer if copy has spelling, style or grammatical errors.
Attendance/Class participation

It is important to attend class during our Wednesday evening allotted time and participate while you are in class. See grading.

Administrative Home

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is the administrative home of this course and governs matters such as the add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and other related issues. Different colleges may have different policies. Questions may be addressed to 120 Schaeffer Hall, or see the CLAS Academic Policies Handbook at http://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook.

Electronic Communication

University policy specifies that students are responsible for all official correspondences sent to their University of Iowa e-mail address (@uiowa.edu). Faculty and students should use this account for correspondences (Operations Manual, III.15.2, k.11).

Accommodations for Disabilities

A student seeking academic accommodations should first register with Student Disability Services and then meet privately with the course instructor to make particular arrangements. See www.uiowa.edu/~sds/ for more information.

Academic Honesty

All CLAS students or students taking classes offered by CLAS have, in essence, agreed to the College's Code of Academic Honesty: "I pledge to do my own academic work and to excel to the best of my abilities, upholding the IOWA Challenge. I promise not to lie about my academic work, to cheat, or to steal the words or ideas of others; nor will I help fellow students to violate the Code of Academic Honesty." Any student committing academic misconduct is reported to the College and placed on disciplinary probation or may be suspended or expelled (CLAS Academic Policies Handbook).

CLAS Final Examination Policies

The final examination schedule for each class is announced by the Registrar generally by the tenth day of classes. Final exams are offered only during the official final examination period. No exams of any kind are allowed during the last week of classes. All students should plan on being at the UI through the final examination period. Once the Registrar has announced the date, time, and location of each final exam, the complete schedule will be published on the Registrar's web site and will be shared with instructors and students. It is the student's responsibility to know the date, time, and place of a final exam.
Making a Suggestion or a Complaint

Students with a suggestion or complaint should first visit with the instructor (and the course supervisor), and then with the departmental DEO. Complaints must be made within six months of the incident (CLAS Academic Policies Handbook).

Understanding Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. All members of the UI community have a responsibility to uphold this mission and to contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment should be reported immediately. See the UI Comprehensive Guide on Sexual Harassment for assistance, definitions, and the full University policy.

Reacting Safely to Severe Weather

In severe weather, class members should seek appropriate shelter immediately, leaving the classroom if necessary. The class will continue if possible when the event is over. For more information on Hawk Alert and the siren warning system, visit the Department of Public Safety website.

Semester schedule.

(Subject to change pending availability of speakers and or news developments in health care that may break over the course of the semester)

Week One (Wednesday, August 28)
The Affordable Care Act overview. Class overview: getting started, writing concisely and choosing topics that people will want to read. What's important to consumers about health care news and why? We will also sign up for news web sites. You can get started by signing up to Forbes to follow me. We will also sign up for and review other sites that are free and push out important information.

Week Two (September 4)
The Affordable Care Act. The launch. Writing concisely. The fewer words, the better, particularly with medical care. We will take a look at some of the early marketing campaigns of the Affordable Care Act to individuals and Medicaid recipients under the expanded coverage.

Week Three (September 11)
Insurance, quality and outcomes. We will begin to look at key cost-containment and quality improvement efforts in health care and how to communicate them. In addition, we will talk about covering an event, speech or medical conference as you gather information throughout the semester for our various projects. Never be afraid to ask a doctor or health executive what they mean. “Doc, I know you are an otolaryngology specialist but don’t you really mean: ear, nose and throat doctor.”
Week Four (September 18)
**Medicare as well as Medicaid.** This vast government health insurance program is important. We will begin to look at communicating basics of how this program works and is changing, discussing basic mechanics and building on Sept. 11 week discussion. Many initiatives in Medicare related to quality and outcomes are also going on in the private insurance sector.

Week Five (September 25)
**More Medicare.** Continuation from weeks Sept. 11 and 18, relating to potential project ideas for final and mid-term.

Week Six (October 2)
**Providers of medical care.** Medical, health and science web sites. What can they do for you in your reporting, writing and communicating efforts? They help broaden a story beyond local. You have a friend with a rare condition or a family member with a health insurance hassle. This helps make your story more powerful. Possible guest speaker.

Week Seven (October 9) (Individual conferences)
Let’s look at where we are in the semester and talk about your mid-term due next week and the end-of-semester story, memo or project you want to do. We will likely schedule individually allotted time and students will be credited as class time for these important individual sessions.

Week Eight (October 16)
A story, essay or speech of 400 to 500 words (two or three pages double-spaced is due. Take a position on an aspect of health care reform. Perhaps you know someone who cannot get insurance or you know a small business that cannot afford to provide care to employees. Or, maybe there is an aspect of the Affordable Care Act that is not even being addressed.

Let’s also talk about what you want to do for a final project. Writing a story about a person, a condition, disease, health insurance dispute or public policy issue. Profile and interview techniques to be discussed.

Week Nine (October 23) **Medical Journals, Peer-reviewed Research and Scientific Studies**
Writing and reporting about medical journal reports, scientific breakthroughs and things a young reporter, public relations executive or marketer might do in their first communications job. We will examine this world, what to look for in the articles and how to read these often formula written, yet complicated works by academics and researchers.

Week Ten (October 30)
**Reporting tools, statistics and the Internet as a resource.** Guest speaker and possible in-class exercise to assist with your work.

Week 11 (November 6)
Drugs, Big Pharma and the Food and Drug Administration. We will do an exercise in-class that takes an impenetrable press release from a medical company or the Food and Drug Administration web site, for example, and we will re-write it for a mass audience. We will search on the Web for ways to break it down.

Week 12 (November 13)
End-of-life and hospice care. Though a lightning rod during the Presidential campaign and the debate over the Affordable Care Act, end-of-life care is coming into its own. We have an invited speaker from a startup health and information web site planned.

Week 13 (November 20)
Open discussion. Medical ethics and law.

Week 14 (November 27)
No class due to Thanksgiving recess.

Week 15 (December 4)
Final project is due by the end of this week. 500 to 700 words  (Length to be discussed. Semester overview, project assistance)

About the professor
Bruce Japsen is an award-winning, health care journalist, based in Chicago. He writes for Forbes as well as several other publications including the New York Times, Chicago Medicine and Life Matters Media on health care, medical issues and policy. He has more than 25 years of professional and academic journalism experience, including newspaper, TV, radio and Web-based media, working as the health care business reporter at the Chicago Tribune from 1998 to 2011. He is a regular television analyst on PBS’ WTTW’s Chicago Tonight show, WBBM Newsradio-780 AM and 105.9 FM and XM-Sirius Satellite Radio’s ReachMD 167. He has also been a reporter at Crain’s Modern Healthcare magazine, the Dubuque (IA) Telegraph Herald and the Des Moines Register, covering everything from Big Ten football and basketball to an Academy Award nominated movie and presidential politics. Japsen has taught at Loyola University Chicago’s School of Communication for seven years and has also taught in the University of Chicago’s Graham School of General Studies medical editing and publishing program. He also sits on the University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication Advisory Board.

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