



Improving Healthcare for a Healthy Economy

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One of two articles to focus on Medical and Healthcare issues

Dr. Dan Foster's career has spanned his interests as a physician, a public policy advocate and a politician, including his decade long service as a WV Legislator and on numerous boards and commissions, including West Virginians for Affordable Health Care and the West Virginia Symphony. In 2012, Dr. Foster was named 2012 West Virginian of the Year by the Sunday Gazette-Mail.

I moved to West Virginia 35 years ago to practice surgery. I came here because of an outstanding opportunity, but, more importantly, because I felt I would be needed. Although I certainly hope that I made a difference for my patients, over the years I have seen our state's health characteristics remain among the worst in the country. Fortunately, there have been a few bright spots, such as improvements in youth smoking and obesity rates, but overall the situation remains dire.

It's encouraging that many experts are optimistic about West Virginia's future because of its location, strong financial position, physical beauty, and abundant natural resources (with water being the most important for the long term). Yet, it is my contention that you can't have a healthy economy unless you have healthy people and a medical system that is well-designed to control the costs and quality of services that keep these citizens healthy.



So, in my opinion, even if we do everything else right, we are at great risk if we don't also do the following:

- 1) Use public policy to address our remaining burden of tobacco use and obesity, which lead to numerous chronic illnesses that dramatically affect human capital and both public and private budgets. Raising tobacco taxes and promoting strategies that increase physical activity and access to nutritious food are the first steps. Heightened efforts to address our related mental health and substance abuse problems should not be far behind.
- 2) Make sure that all citizens can obtain comprehensive, affordable health insurance. Our state has done a most commendable job in signups for expanded Medicaid, but clearly needs to do more for those who are not Medicaid-eligible.
- 3) Reform our systems of care delivery and provider reimbursement. Our present system is fragmented, uncoordinated, and wasteful with payment incentives that are not conducive to improving quality and lowering cost. We are far behind many other states.
- 4) Continue to change the culture of care at the end-of-life. West Virginians consume a significant share of their lifetime medical costs in their last months, often because of aggressive treatments and repeated hospitalizations that are unnecessary, unwanted, and inappropriate.

Mountaineers have come far since the challenges of 1863. Our path forward is promising, but success is not assured. By addressing these specific concerns, sooner rather than later, our next 150 years should present us with unlimited potential.