

Health facilities an issue of survival for small towns

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New Mexicans should be tired of all the state rankings, since they only seem to show us as the worst, or among the worst, in such issues as poverty, education, child welfare and more. So forgive me when I say, I've got one more — emergency services.

I ran into this particular ranking in the AARP Bulletin, a monthly publication that I receive for getting old and paying my old-folks dues. I read about it in the Bulletin, but really it's the American College of Emergency Physicians that sounded the alarm.

This professional organization painted a dismal picture for all our domestic emergency services, giving the nation a D+ on its most recent emergency services Report Card. And not surprisingly, it tossed New Mexico into the cellar, along with Wyoming, which got an F, and Arkansas, which came out with a D-. New Mexico, 49th of the 51 ranked, got a D.

Interestingly, Washington, D.C., was ranked first in the nation for its emergency services, with a B-, while Massachusetts — home of Romneycare, the precursor to Obamacare — was second, also with a B-.

But it's those Ds and Fs that bode poorly, especially, for the elderly, since they have more emergencies, and for the working poor, since they can't afford preventative care and often put off their problems until emergency treatment becomes necessary.

As is the case with just about every issue facing America's health care industry, it's about money. That's particularly true at small town hospitals and clinics. In recent years, a lot of public hospitals have been closed, turned over to a private management firm, or sold to a for-profit health care chain. No surprise there, really, since several formerly public services have been turned over to private enterprises, from our state's prisons to all those for-profit schools springing up around the country.

Of course, the thing about private enterprise is that, while it's far more efficient, it has to turn a profit or it shuts down. No private hospital or clinic is going to keep its doors open for long if it's losing money.

But government, in all its inefficiencies, can keep them open. City and county governments can and do impose taxes to make up for shortfalls — and they're doing exactly that right now in New Mexico. Nowadays, thanks to changes imposed by Obamacare and our state legislature, counties are passing gross-receipts tax hikes to ensure their hospitals get adequate reimbursements for indigent care services. If your hometown newspaper hasn't reported on

such an issue in your county yet, hang on, because you'll probably be reading about it soon enough.

It's really a survival issue for a lot of small communities. As their populations age, basic health services, including emergency care, literally and figuratively become a matter of life and death. That's why so many old country people move to town for their retirement years, to be close to doctors, clinics and hospitals. And if the nearest town can't provide the services they need, they might just move to the bigger cities.

Not too long ago the *Associated Press* reported on how some rural facilities are turning to "telemedicine" to care for their patients. Through audio and video hookups, small town general practitioners can confer with big city specialists and other health professionals about the health and condition of their patients. It's been going on for a couple of decades now, but telemedicine is becoming more and more common, the AP reported.

It sounds like a no-brainer in this wildly interconnected world in which we live, but it only goes so far. People want live, face-to-face conversations when talking about their more serious health concerns, and sometimes doctors need to be right there to figure out what's wrong.

Nevertheless, people who live in this vast rural expanse we call New Mexico are somewhat used to doing without, and many will stay in the countryside whether there's a health care facility nearby or not. It's in their blood to live that way.

If there's a way to save a little more of that blood for the sake of independent living, I'm for it — as long as the post office keeps delivering my old-folks news.

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