

Respected Local Doctor Shares His View On Health Care

“Working poor people in Henderson County can’t get any health coverage, not any. That’s wrong.”

— Dr. Doug Curran

By Toni Garrard Clay



Dr. Doug Curran is a storyteller, one whose stories always have a point. The story he shared one recent evening in his office, while taking a break from charting, was about a Henderson County woman in her mid-50s.

“She’s a cook at a nearby restaurant, and, of course, she doesn’t have insurance,” said Curran. “Well, she went to the hospital with heart failure. We treated her heart failure and got her back on her feet again. I wrote her scripts for three months’ worth of the medication she needs. She can afford the medications because they only cost her \$4 each. But she can’t afford the lab test or an office visit to see me again to keep her on her meds. So I don’t know what happened to her. Most likely, she’ll end up back in the hospital.”

The number of people in Henderson County who fit that description — who fall between the cracks of health coverage — could fill doctors’ waiting rooms daily. In fact, they do end up in the waiting rooms of the emergency departments at ETMC Athens and Gun Barrel City. That is one of the reasons the hospital opened an on-site clinic last year in Athens for non-urgent care. The need of the working uninsured in Henderson County also prompted Disciples Clinic to open its doors in Athens four years ago. Disciples Clinic is a volunteer-based health care clinic catering to the county’s working poor who do not qualify for government assistance or have any form of health insurance. And still, the need far outreaches the resources available.

This reality is why Curran, a family physician who has practiced in Athens since 1979, is a firm believer that the Affordable Care Act, though flawed, is a springboard for positive changes. “Health care in America costs too much, and the Affordable Care Act is the beginning of changing how we deliver medicine. ... I think it (the way the law is crafted) is going to change a whole lot over the next few years. I wish people would see it as a beginning. The good parts of it we need to keep, and the bad parts we need to fix.”

One would be hard-pressed to find a physician anywhere in the country more connected to both patients and the politics of medicine than Curran. He was named Texas Academy of Family Doctors Physician of the Year in 1999, has served as president of the Texas Academy of Family Physicians and testified before state House and Senate committees. He became involved politically 15 years ago because he felt there were not enough people involved with the political side of medicine who also worked on the front lines. “I felt somebody needed to go tell our story,” said Curran. “And the other docs here agreed.”

“Doug has a vision for health care that goes beyond even the state level. He truly wants all concerned to come together and work for the best health care system in the world,” said Dr. Ken Lemmon, a friend and fellow founder of Lakeland Medical Associates. “Many of us talk and gripe about things, but Doug jumps in and does something about it.”

Curran is particularly unhappy that Texas — which has the highest uninsured population in the country — is among about two dozen states who chose not to expand Medicaid coverage, creating what is now referred to as the “coverage gap.” According to the Texas Medical Association, approximately 1 million Texans are in that gap — meaning they earn too much to qualify for Medicaid under Texas’ existing eligibility criteria but don’t qualify for health insurance premium subsidies under the Affordable Care Act because their income is below the federal poverty level (\$11,670 for an individual and \$19,790 for a family of three). Gov. Rick Perry’s office said putting more taxpayer dollars into Medicaid would be “reckless and irresponsible.”

“So what we’re doing instead is leaving money on the table,” said Curran. “Money otherwise earmarked for us — our tax money — will go back into the pot to be used by other states if needed. ... We wouldn’t even have to contribute a dime for the first two years. Not a dime. And if, after two years, we wanted to pull out of the program, we could.”

According to a report commissioned by Methodist Health Care Ministries, if Texas expanded Medicaid eligibility, it would receive \$100 billion in federal funds over 10 years and have to pay \$15 billion from general revenue.

“Working poor people in Henderson County and in Texas can’t get any health coverage, not any. That’s wrong,” said Curran. “If we have any compassion at all, we ought to be about making sure people who just work hard can get coverage.”

Those individuals in need of urgent care who do not have health insurance are able to receive care at ETMC Athens. But it is not without cost to the hospital or taxpayers. In fiscal year 2013, ETMC Athens wrote off \$31.7 million in charity care for Henderson County residents. And, as Curran points out, the insured pay through higher insurance premiums.

Curran is a believer in engaging in the political process and urges others to make their opinions known to their representatives in government. “If a majority of our population has access to health care,” he said, “they can stay healthier longer, making our country stronger and better.”

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