

Lewiston Tribune, Thursday, June 26, 2008 – Editorial by Jim Fisher

Another way health care mess abuses all

Here's a question for any Idahoans who are disturbed to learn their county government is responsible to pay the health care costs of indigent illegal immigrants:

Why should county government be responsible to pay the health care costs of anyone, except perhaps its own employees?

You might say the Idaho Supreme Court performed a vital public service in its recent finding that the state's most populous county, Ada, could not refuse to reimburse Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center for the \$187,000 the hospital spent to treat stroke victim and undocumented worker Javier Ortega Sandoval. It revealed to the public yet another way in which this country's health care system is dysfunctional. And that dysfunction has nothing to do with immigration, legal or otherwise.

Under the law, counties are obliged to pay for the health care of indigent residents, and they pay a lot. Last year alone, county governments spent about \$18 million. And that does not include the state's catastrophic insurance fund that is designed to relieve counties of the most severe related strains on their budgets. Legislators put nearly \$21 million into that last year.

When the court found that Sandoval was indeed a resident of Ada County, it merely decided which pool of people would pay for the medical care Sandoval would have received no matter his status. If that pool were not county taxpayers - which is a much larger pool in Ada County than it is in many of Idaho's smaller counties - it probably would have been Saint Alphonsus' other patients and/or their employers.

Other patients and/or their employers already pay for a good deal of health care not received by them. That's because hospitals shift to other hospital users those costs that are not paid by the people incurring them.

One of the bigger groups of such people is those who go to emergency rooms for their ordinary health care, because they have no money and nowhere else to go. Although the per capita cost of that care is much higher than in a doctor's office, we all help pay it every time we receive a hospital service. And we do that year after year, because no one has pointed the country to a saner, less costly system.

A saner, less costly system would have fewer small pools, which require some to pay more than others depending on the comparative health of their fellow pool members. The sanest would have one big pool, meaning all of us, no matter which county or state we are residents of and no matter whether we are financially solvent or indigent.

Yes, it's the government health care, or rather government health insurance, that John McCain and other conservatives warn us of. And it is what other developed countries have had for years. The United States has it too, just not for all of us. As your own health care costs rise, thanks to shrinking employer insurance coverage and to an inflation rate exceeding that for other goods and services, ask yourself why Javier Ortega Sandoval qualifies for something you do not. - J.F.