



**OP-ED**

*Outsourcing the Medical Care of Public Employees Overseas is Illogical*

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House Bill 2841 was recently introduced in the West Virginia Legislature. This bill provides financial incentives for public employees that obtain medical care in foreign healthcare facilities. There are several factors that need to be addressed before this legislation is considered by lawmakers.

The concept of sending West Virginians to the other side of the world for medical care appears to be based on the premise of saving money, but the savings are virtually non-existent. For many of the procedures, the rates paid to hospitals by the Public Employees Insurance Agency are already equal to, or very close to the rates charged by the overseas hospitals and doctors. The "savings" virtually disappear when you consider the total cost: the actual medical procedure, the cost of airfare, other travel costs, the related lodging costs before and after the procedure and additional time away from work for travel. One also has to consider the potential for medical complications after the procedure while enroute home. And the patient would virtually be half-a-world away with limited access to family and other loved ones.

There are sound economic reasons to support the economy of our State. Our 73 hospitals and health systems are listed among the top private employers in West Virginia annually, and they employ more than 36,000 people with an annual payroll of more than \$1 billion. Our hospitals, their employees and family members generate billions of dollars of indirect and related business to West Virginia's economy, and our hospitals provide charity and uncompensated patient care, valued at more than \$500 million annually.

MORE

**OUTSOURCING THE MEDICAL CARE OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES OVERSEAS IS  
ILLOGICAL/February 13, 2007/PAGE 2**

West Virginia's four major teaching hospitals and health systems are training tomorrow's healthcare providers including physicians, nurses and other clinicians. Other acute care hospitals in the State also provide training for nurses and other allied healthcare professionals. This training is crucial to ensure an ongoing and adequate workforce in our State as the average age of our healthcare professionals increases.

Fourteen counties in West Virginia have no hospital; 31 counties have only one hospital; and there are 10 counties with at least two hospitals. Since the mid 1980s, 15 hospitals have closed. A loss of business to overseas providers would further cripple care in the most rural parts of our State. This is an important consideration in the notion of giving public employees incentives to fly around the world in search of medical treatment they can receive locally – right here in West Virginia.

Most of us know someone who works in one of our State's hospitals, physician's office, health clinic or other health facility. Our hospitals are here for their patients to receive access to quality care - elective procedures and emergency services that are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If those with health insurance who need elective surgeries are encouraged to seek care outside of West Virginia, our already very fragile healthcare infrastructure will be at great risk. This proposal would result in fewer procedures being performed in our State which would reduce opportunities for physicians to have viable practices. It would also lessen the attractiveness of West Virginia as a place for physicians to locate, which would diminish the availability of health services.

Finally, this proposal flies in the face of Governor Manchin's "*Open For Business*" campaign by investing our dollars in foreign markets instead of our own State. Outsourcing the medical care of public employees is illogical considering the quality medical resources we have right here in West Virginia.

Let us instead continue to focus our attention and efforts on proposals that will be beneficial to the healthcare system and people of West Virginia – like adequate funding of the Medicaid program, growing the next generation of doctors, nurses and other clinicians, encouraging healthier lifestyles and providing access to quality care to the citizens of West Virginia.

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