

Commentary: Celebrating National Rural Health Day

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On November 19 we observe National Rural Health Day—not unlike Thanksgiving, an opportunity to count our blessings as well as time for a bit of self-reflection. As made clear by Wisconsin’s “Stop the COVID Spread!” coalition, the public health crisis gripping rural America worsens by the day. We must continue to fight for our communities and our hospitals. At the same time, we must prepare for our post-COVID future.

You may remember Robert Fulghum. He is the author of “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.” More recently, he has offered questions that parents (or other adults in the room) may find helpful: “What on Earth have you done? What in the name of God are you doing? “What will you think of next?” “Who do you think you are?” If asked with kindness, they strike me as four good questions for each of us to ask during these extraordinarily times. Here is my first stab of an answer for myself and for rural health.

“What on Earth have we done?”—Like much of America, urban and rural populations in Wisconsin grew at similar rates from 1990 to 2009. Our rural population in Wisconsin then took a big dip with two-thirds of rural counties seeing their populations drop between 2010 and 2018. That decline is associated with a smaller workforce, fewer jobs and ultimately slower income growth. According to County Health Ranking and Roadmaps, 65% of rural counties now rank in the bottom half of Wisconsin counties, compared to 23% of urban counties. Social and economic factors are clearly driving poor health in rural Wisconsin.

Shawn Lerch, CEO of Sauk Prairie Healthcare, has noted, “in rural health, we have long experienced the interdependence between rural hospitals and the communities we serve. There is clearly a symbiotic relationship between economic status and health outcomes. The Great Recession that started in 2008 and now COVID, highlight the magnitude of this connection. Unfortunately, the economic and resulting health equity gap has widened as rural communities and rural hospitals continue to struggle.”

Brock Slabach at the National Rural Health Association recently observed that “rural populations tend to be older, sicker and poorer than urban populations and they have less access to medical, dental and mental health care. Those disparities likely will mean that a higher percentage of rural residents infected with COVID during this surge will end up in hospitals. And no matter how prepared we may be, there will be shortages of staff and personal protective equipment.”



“What in the name of God are we doing?”—I know that in my almost 50 years in health care, I have never been more proud to be part of the rural health movement. At our last RWHC Board meeting, I had the privilege to listen to a “round robin” of over 30 rural hospital administrators describing local challenges and successes in the middle of the pandemic raging in rural Wisconsin—it was an awesome demonstration of rural health leaders doing what they do best—caring, preparing and pivoting as needed.

While RWHC’s focus is rural, we know that for rural to succeed we must find common ground with those working statewide and in our urban communities and they with us; this is a tall order but a state and country so starkly divided cannot prosper.

“What will we think of next?”—Over the last two years, RWHC has been developing an initiative focusing on “Community Economic Development as a Driver of Rural Health.” The pandemic has made this work more important now than ever. Hospitals in rural Wisconsin are poised to accelerate this work. Examples include expanding childcare and housing as well as assisting business new starts and expansions. As anchor institutions, rural hospitals are well positioned to join with others in providing a leadership role to foster more vibrant and resilient communities. RWHC and rural hospital health leaders in Wisconsin have begun work to:

- Increase rural hospital engagement with multi-sector community economic development
- Increase the effectiveness of rural hospital engagement
- Bring a rural health perspective into state community economic development
- Bring a state community economic development perspective into rural health

“Who do we think we are?”—While I think for most of us this is a heartbreaking time, I believe our future requires hope and new ways of doing. We can choose despair, our silos and inaction. But I see rural health leaders choosing hope and collaboration. Rural hospitals and the communities we serve can be incubators of success and a key part of renewing rural America.

In conclusion, I would like to share this message from a friend on Face Book who operates a dairy farm in Wisconsin with her husband (used with her permission):

“I debated making this post but if it saves one of my friends, family member or neighbor it’s worth it. Covid-19 is real and it messes with your body. To our farmer friends, yes the field work needs to get done but wear a mask and keep your distance when you’re working with one another. My suggestion is to keep some paper masks in your truck and tractors. When you have to give each other rides from one field to the next - everyone should have a mask on at minimum. When you are BSing (as farmers like to do ☺) stay back from one another. Think about those you may inadvertently infect. Think about who will do your work if you end up in the hospital. It can happen and it really isn’t worth the game of Russian Roulette. Stay healthy.”