

## Health forum: Reform has momentum now

Panel speaks at Chamber of Commerce summit

12:25 AM, Mar. 29, 2012 |



Rulon Stacey, CEO of University of Colorado Health, gives the keynote address Wednesday at the Chamber of Commerce's Health Care Summit in Loveland. Stacey said health care reform has momentum now no matter how the U.S. Supreme Court decides on President Barack Obama's health-care overhaul. V. RICHARD HARD THE COLORADOAN

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LOVELAND - No matter how the U.S. Supreme Court rules on the Obama administration-backed affordable health-care act, momentum will carry reform forward, local experts said at a health-care summit Wednesday.

"Whatever decision they make will be irrelevant to providers," said Rulon Stacey, CEO of University of Colorado Health, formerly Poudre Valley Health System.

"Whether the health-care act is in place or not, will society be less willing to hold providers accountable to decrease costs and improve quality?" he said. "The same pressure will be on us

whether the law passes or not."

The Supreme Court has spent the past three days hearing oral arguments about whether the 2-year-old law is constitutional.

Depending on the court's decision, it could nullify the act's most controversial provision - the individual mandate that requires everyone to have insurance by 2014.

Supporters say everyone at some point in their lives will need and use health-care services and should have insurance to help pay for it.

Opponents believe it's unconstitutional for the federal government to require citizens to buy a specific product.

No matter which side of the political debate one is on, efforts to decrease costs, increase access and improve patient care will continue, said the panel of providers, insurance and pharmaceutical representatives at the Fort

Collins Area Chamber of Commerce's first health-care summit at the Loveland Embassy Suites Spa and Hotel.

But, they agreed the individual mandate will add stress to a system that won't have enough providers to care for the estimated 50 million uninsured people who will be added to the insurance rolls.

Consumers, frustrated now if they can't get a same-day appointment with their doctors, may have to learn a little patience, said Yvonne Myers, director of Columbine Health Systems in Fort Collins.

The complex and controversial health-care debate that reaches into board rooms and living rooms will require difficult conversations about end-of-life care, personal responsibility, economics and the government's role in the debate, the panelists said.

Reforms, under way since before the affordable care act was adopted two years ago, create both economic opportunities and challenges for the industry, employers who provide the bulk of health-care insurance in the U.S. and their employees who consume it.

The national debate should not be over health-care reform, but over health reform, said Dr. Jim Sprowell, administrator of Associates in Family Medicine, which has 70,000 patients throughout Northern Colorado.

Reducing obesity rates, making healthy lifestyle choices and seeking preventive care will go a long way toward reducing the high cost of treating chronic illnesses, he said.

Even though Colorado is one of the leanest states in the country, one of five residents is obese, which can lead to diabetes, heart disease and other chronic conditions, he said.

"It's a parental, school, public health and employer issue," he said. "If we don't do something about it ... we will have a big problem."

### **Driving change, driving an economy**

Health-care reform already is driving massive change in Larimer County.

Poudre Valley Health System in the past two years has created Poudre Valley Medical Group, which employs more than 100 doctors, partnered with University of Colorado Health to create a larger health system and began offering Colorado Choice Health Plans, a health insurance program for small businesses.

Banner Health, which operates McKee Medical Center in Loveland and North Colorado Medical Center in Greeley, recently partnered with Kaiser Permanente, a health-care and insurance company.

And all medical providers are working to convert patients' charts to electronic medical records.

While health care is a personal issue, it also is an economic driver, adding \$1.1 billion to the Northern Colorado economy in 2010, said CSU economist Martin Shields.

With 60 percent of all Americans getting their health insurance through their employers, ensuring quality health care remains affordable for businesses and individuals is critical to the region's economic health, he said.

Health care is the only sector of the economy that grew during the recent recession and employs 17,000 workers, making it the fifth largest industry in Larimer County.

The sector only will grow larger as baby boomers age, requiring a greater amount of care.

Unless the workforce responds to train more health-care workers, "there will be too few workers" to care for everyone, he said.

That, in turn, makes a region less attractive to prospective employers considering moving here, he said.

Matt Walker, a lawyer with Sherman & Howard who specializes in employment benefits law, said since so many people get health insurance through their employers "how the rubber hits the road and how employers deal with health care will be important.

"No matter what happens (with the Supreme Court), it's good there is a new conversation about how it works."