

PERSPECTIVE

Promoting Health Care Transparency and Competition



What's Wrong With Frankfort ?

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By Kevin T. Kavanagh, MD

Maybe it's that Jeff Barnett, Director of the Governor's Certificate of Need Office, cannot do math. It's been a long time, but from what I can remember, 41 plus 7 is greater than 32. In other words, Jessamine County is spending more on two acute ambulatory care centers, a total of 48 million dollars, than it would have cost to have the initially proposed acute care hospital built for 32 million. One has to wonder what is driving Frankfort's thinking.

Acute care centers are not life-saving facilities. Ambulances cannot stop there. If you have a serious problem they must, by law, speed past and you must pray they can reach in time a hospital across county lines. If you have a heart attack, stroke or are involved in multiple trauma, time is critical. For best results treatment should be started within an hour.

I am perplexed why Frankfort does not understand this. They seem set on keeping this long drive and keeping Jessamine County residents from ready access to acute health care. Nicholasville is the 13th largest city in Kentucky. There are over 100 hospitals in Kentucky; and Jessamine County is the only densely populated county without a hospital. In addition, Jessamine County is growing and has an excellent economy. It is surrounded by counties with major universities one of which even has a medical school. Kentucky loses over half of its resident doctors it trains. Expanding medical services in a

growing county with a vibrant economy may help to reverse this trend.

The regulations touted to allow the building of additional acute care hospitals actually do the reverse — they actually prevent its construction. They are so tight that it is doubtful that any additional hospital will be built in Kentucky. It would have been more honest, saved time, money and community turmoil to just say that.

Honesty in government is important. What was not readily known is that all the talk about the conditions in Jessamine County never mattered, because the conditions also have to be present in the surrounding counties. Every hospital in Lexington and those in Versailles, Harrodsburg and Richmond would also have to be out of compliance. This would never happen, and Frankfort always knew it. They are the ones who changed the regulations in January 2006.

That's right. It does not matter if you have a stroke and suffer brain damage, the ambulance will whisk by your new acute care center. You may not get the paralysis-reversing and potential life-saving injection of a clot buster in time; instead you will be counting the lights as you travel up U.S. 27 hoping your arrival at a distant hospital is not too late.

The regulations do allow for easier expansion of existing hospitals. Needless to say, the surrounding county

Summary
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**Despite the Need,
Jessamine County
does not Meet the
Governor's
Criteria for
Obtaining a CON
for An Acute Care
Hospital.**

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**In Kentucky, the new
CON regulations are
protecting existing
facilities at the expense
of health care of
Kentuckians.**

criterion does not apply for existing hospital expansion or relocation. Thus, existing hospitals can easily expand and they can make sure a new additional hospital is never built. Jessamine County's problems are not unique. Bullitt County has a similar situation.

There are also counties with for-profit rural hospitals that have a virtual monopoly on health care. These regulations also serve to stifle competition which in all types of markets has the effect of lowering health care costs and promoting quality of services.

It is my opinion that the new CON regulations are protecting existing facilities at the expense of health care of Kentuckians. The Fletcher administration has stated that they are "focused on the task of making Kentucky a better

place to work and live" (Courier Journal, July 7, 2006). I believe changes need to be made in the administration health care policy in order to fulfill this mission.

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