

Idaho Statesman, Sunday, Nov. 29, 2015 – Guest opinion by Kevin Rich (2 pages)

We can make Idaho healthier

As a physician, I care about my patients and I want to see them healthy and well. As an Idahoan, I know that we all want our friends and neighbors to be able to go to the doctor and get the care they need without facing disastrous medical bills.

And as a person of faith, I pray that fewer of our neighbors will suffer costly and painful emergencies that could have been prevented with earlier care. Idahoans are working hard to build a future for their families, and I can tell you from experience that too many of my patients face financial catastrophe from a single illness or injury.

That's why we need to close Idaho's coverage gap and pass the Healthy Idaho Plan. Our current system has made reduced-cost coverage available to middle-income families, but because Idaho has not taken action, low-wage earners have been left without the ability to get health insurance they can afford. Nearly 78,000 Idahoans are in this predicament. When illnesses or injuries arise, they don't have the security to continue working and contributing to their families and our economy.

There are thousands of working Idahoans who make too little to qualify for reduced-cost coverage through Your Health Idaho, our state-based health exchange. When Idahoans don't have health coverage, the consequences can be disastrous for families, our state and the economy. Too often I see patients with treatable diseases that become serious medical issues because they can't afford simple procedures. Many have to choose between food and needed medication, and some are putting off treatment until they reach the eligibility age for Medicare. This can be prevented. There is no good reason things have to be this way.

Let's think about ways to strengthen our economy. Think about a state where kids get off to a better start because their parents are healthy. Think about how much less costly and painful treatment is when cancer is detected early. Think about how much better our economy will be when our neighbors don't miss work or lose their jobs because they have to go without their medication. In fact, studies commissioned by the state of Idaho have found that we would have seen \$173 million in savings over 10 years if our Legislature had passed the Healthy Idaho Plan in 2015. We could still see over \$100 million in savings over nine years if the Legislature acts in 2016.

An ounce of prevention really is worth a pound of cure. For far too long, we have spent too much time and money treating conditions that could have been avoided. Affordable health insurance makes both physical and fiscal sense for Idaho. Let's close the health coverage gap and build a healthier Idaho.

Dr. Kevin Rich is a family physician and currently serves as the chief medical officer and director of operations of Family Medicine Residency of Idaho and of its clinic system. He is the faculty champion for FMRI's Patient Centered Medical Home transformation.