

Doctor flight a myth

Doctors fleeing Oklahoma is simply a myth. The number of doctors in our state is increasing rapidly despite claims that they are leaving because of the legal environment.

Oklahoma had 193 physicians per 100,000 people in 2003, according to American Medical Association statistics. By 2007 the ratio had grown to 200 per 100,000 people.

In 1998 Oklahoma had 6,412 physicians. By 2007 the number had grown to 7,245, an 11.5 percent increase.

The growth in the number of physicians is an obvious sign that doctors are being trained in Oklahoma and are practicing

medicine here, despite scare tactics that depict a nonexistent mass exodus to Texas and elsewhere. If doctors do leave, it's because of a relative lack of residency programs in Oklahoma rather than concerns about liability. And research shows doctors often stay where they complete residency training.



Jeff Raymond

Guest Opinion

The state's leading medical malpractice insurer, doctor-owned Physicians Liability Insurance Co.,

also is doing well. PLICO is in the best financial shape of its three-decade existence, as its executives proclaim and its reports show.

In 2008 PLICO wrote \$63.9 million in premiums and reported claims of \$35.5 million. These numbers tell the real story.

The question the state's doctors should be asking is why PLICO is posting record profits while the number of lawsuits has fallen. Lawsuits aren't the problem — insurance companies are.

Oklahoma is clearly a profitable insurance market for PLICO; no wonder, with lawsuit filings decreasing rapidly. From 2003-07 medical negligence filings decreased by 29.7 percent in the state's 13 most populous counties. Moreover, 39 counties — 51 percent of the state's total — had fewer than five medical malpractice lawsuits from 2004-07.

The evidence of a lawsuit crisis simply isn't there. Those who claim there is one have yet to provide anything more than hearsay and the kinds of anecdotes they regularly dismiss when they come from opponents.

Sometimes what's not being said is much more important than what is. If the legal climate in Oklahoma is so hostile, as the medical and insurance lobbies often claim, why has *Physicians Practice* magazine ranked Oklahoma one of the nation's most physician-friendly states?

Improving health care should include insurance reform and reducing the 100,000 deaths annually from preventable medical errors. These subjects need to be part of the debate but are seldom mentioned.

Disciplining the tiny number of physicians who are responsible for the bulk of medical malpractice payments would be a start.

Insurers also must stop charging doctors of the same specialties the same rates regardless of performance.

Imagine paying the same for your car insurance as someone who has been in repeated wrecks or had a DUI. This is how medical malpractice insurance works.

Oklahoma doctors deserve better than to be pawns of the same insurance companies that have made their practices unmanageable, shortchanged their patients and taken their money while blaming others.

JEFF RAYMOND is executive director of OKWatchdog, a consumer and patient advocacy organization.



Tinker critical to economic future

The national focus is on shoring up an ailing banking system and salvaging the automobile industry. Oklahoma banks remain strong and automobile industry problems are secondary to our needed focus in seeking incentives and reforms to sustain our local companies and building for a stronger aerospace presence.

The new administration is ushering in a new era of defense spending and procurement oversight.

This alone creates the urgent need to proactively support Tinker Air Force Base. Oklahoma's economy is anchored by two large industries: energy and aerospace. Aerospace is vital. We

have the largest commercial maintenance, repair and overhaul facility in the nation in Tulsa at American Airlines and the largest Air Force MRO at Tinker. Protecting this industry is essential to our economic future.

The Oklahoma Department of Commerce with the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University recently formed the Oklahoma Aerospace Institute, an important step in the right direction. But we need coordinated action from state leaders, congressional leaders and local chambers to set long-range goals for sustainment of this industry.

The purchase of the GM plant last year is the beginning of "top to bottom" comprehensive efforts to enhance Tinker's mission. Success doesn't rest with the U.S. Air Force alone but depends on an active government and private sector partnership. "Build it" and they will come only works in "Field of Dreams."

For aerospace businesses to remain or re-locate we need

incentives, workforce development and aggressive support. Prime contractors are at Tinker because of contract work generated there. Tinker needs an expanding mission to ensure future contracting. With an approaching gubernatorial election we need a candidate willing to lead this vital effort. Losing Tinker would devastate central Oklahoma's economy. Tinker is economically essential. The base generates \$3.2 billion statewide annually and employs 27,000. Improving and protecting the base must be a priority. Another round of Base Closure and Realignment looms as early as 2011 and competition will be fierce. Tinker has to be BRAC ready.

Significant in the long run is acquiring new aircraft platforms and services at the base. Capacity is essential in calculating a base's performance and value. Many of the aircraft maintained at Tinker are aging like the KC-135 and B-1. Several types, including the F-15, are being grounded in record numbers and replaced by new aircraft like the F-22 and soon the F-35. Without the older aircraft flying, their MRO needs decrease substantially. This affects the base and its value.

Old platforms have to be replaced with new MRO requirements. This has to be a focus of our leadership. Our congressional delegation must work hand in hand with the state for new MRO responsibilities. Unless we do so we could lose the performance battle to the two other MROs, Warner Robbins and Hill. We cannot be left out of this competition among states for program functions because of inaction. The three bases essentially compete against one another for survival.

Critical to the BRAC evaluation is economic impact, performance, efficiency and capacity. The future of MRO is in maintenance of newer aircraft and engines. Escaping the brunt of this recession we aggressively can put resources into sustaining Tinker's present and future

mission. Right now, among the bases, Tinker is functioning at the least capacity.

Private industry partnerships at Robbins have raised \$65 million for improved capacity and hangars and more than \$200 million in federal monies have been secured for base construction. Take notice. We have to match or exceed these efforts and improve use of capacity.

The issues include capability and workforce. A skilled labor pipeline makes the difference. Existing and new businesses require available labor for expansion. Tinker, with an aging workforce, must be the target of workforce development. As baby boomers retire and new technologies come on the U.S. Air Force will ask for trained employees to sustain new missions. Base workforces have to be ready to handle new aircraft let alone service old platforms. New aircraft require new investment in technology and training. Let's ensure these investments are at Tinker.

Further, more than 70 percent of Tinker's \$5.2 billion budget goes out of state. The more we build a local supply chain for prime contractors, the more dollars we keep here. A trained workforce can be an incentive for new businesses to locate near the base.

Leadership is needed at the highest level. Which candidate will weigh in? Government, with private-sector support, must develop a long-term investment plan to support this economic gem. This is essential work establishing a premiere workforce, helping local suppliers compete, creating a state-sponsored federal contractor empowerment zone near base, supporting prime contractor incentives and ensuring Congressional support to fight for new services.

Let's do it right and make Tinker an economic priority. Other states are taking this fight seriously. We cannot afford not to.

PHIL G. BUSEY SR. is chairman and CEO of The Busey Group of Companies.



Phil G. Busey Sr.

Guest Opinion

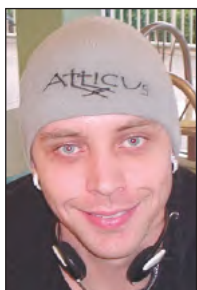
SUN SPOTS

SHARING YOUR THOUGHTS WITH OUR READERS

QUESTION:

This is National Eye Donor month. Are you an organ donor?

Question asked at the University of Central Oklahoma.



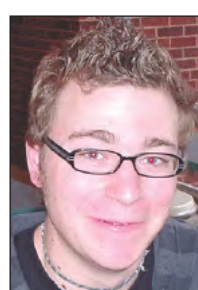
'Yes.'

Colby Dean, 25
Edmond



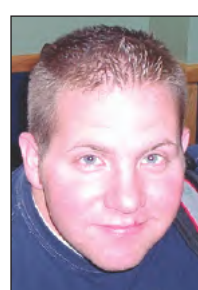
'Yes.'

Van Nguyen, 40
Edmond



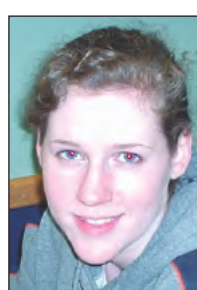
'Yes.'

Jess Way, 18
Edmond



'Yes.'

Kevin Stanford, 25
Edmond



'Yes.'

Emily Bowie, 21
Oklahoma City



'Yes.'

Russell Williams, 49
Selmer, Tenn.

TODAY'S VERSE

A SELECTION

'Blessed are those

whose lawless deeds
have been forgiven,
and whose sins have
been covered.'

Romans 4:7

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Archives, photo reprints and back issues available.

The Edmond Sun (ISSN 1522-5828) publishes a paid newspaper daily Tuesday through Saturday except Monday and Sunday and all legal holidays at 123 S. Broadway, Edmond, OK 73034-3899.

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Subscription rates
Single copies
Week day.....50¢
Saturday.....1.50

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