

In the last month, I have been lucky to see many of the parts of our rural health care system in Southern Missouri. They are working well, thanks to the dedicated medical professionals who staff our hospitals, clinics, pharmacies and doctors' offices.

In many places, the medical providers are the doctors we have been going to all of our lives. They have been with us for years, and some of them are thinking about handing their practice off to someone new. In other communities, young professionals are moving in; they are attracted by the quality of life in Southern Missouri, the opportunity to spend time developing professional relationships with their patients, and the chance to be part of new ideas, new facilities, and new models for care.

Our family physicians are in the midst of a transition, but there is lots of hope for health care in Southern Missouri. Our college and graduate programs are full of smart, motivated students in all kinds of medical fields. They want to stay close to home and serve the communities they love. And new technologies play an important role, too, in making up for the decades of care provided by our trusted physicians.

What used to require a trip to a specialist 120 miles away can now be accomplished in an e-mail. Ultrasound images or video can be securely transmitted from one doctor to a specialist in another city so they can consult on a patient's behalf. A counselor can video-chat with a patient, sparing them the cost of a three hour drive, but providing them with the support they need. Telemedicine is being practiced in many more communities in our region, bringing specialists to places they can serve patients who cannot easily travel to see them.

In medical technology, in nursing, in prenatal care, in mental health treatments, in early diagnosis and prevention -- health care professionals in Southern Missouri are making great strides. Best of all, we are training them here, too. No one cares more about the system of care for the grandparents in our communities than the grandchildren. And those are the young people seeking rewarding careers in health care today. It is vitally important that we keep them here.

There is one thing we must not do if we are to encourage this model of growth in health care, and that is to allow anything to disrupt the trusted relationship between caregivers and their patients. If bureaucracy, regulations, politicians, or giant name-brand drug companies manage

to get between doctors and their patients, then our whole system of care in Southern Missouri will be at risk.

The students and the young professionals in medical fields who I meet in Southern Missouri are doing this job here because it gives them pride to serve us. They understand the contribution they can make when they perform such an important duty. If we allow that sense of importance to be undermined, they could easily lose that sense of professional satisfaction -- the idea that they matter.

And they DO matter, very much, to the future of patient care and of the medical profession. There is just as much innovation taking place in Southern Missouri as there is in any city in the country. We are the ones who benefit from having them close to us, and keeping them in a place where their contributions are essential to our health, our well-being, and our future.