

To the Editor and the Citizens of Riverton --

In the immortal words of Yogi Berra, "It's déjà vu all over again."

When we moved to Riverton in January 1973 to join the Wind River Medical Group, the two Fremont county hospitals were non-profit institutions owned by the County and both were managed by the Lutheran Hospitals and Homes Society (LHHS; they are not directly associated with the Lutheran Church). The Riverton medical community was at that time made up of 6 GP/FP's and one general surgeon. Lander's medical community, on the other hand, was a vibrant mix of well-trained specialists and a very robust and progressive hospital. The contrast was stark – most of the allotted County money went to Lander to bolster their medical community, to the detriment of the Riverton hospital and doctors.

After experiencing a few years of this one-sided arrangement, some in the Riverton medical community – which had grown now and included more specialty caregivers – decided that the only way for the Riverton hospital to prosper and grow was to divorce ownership from the County and management from LHHS and pursue private ownership of our hospital. We argued that healthy competition begets better innovation and care, and in fact for many years that proved to be the case.

But with the passage of time, we once again find ourselves in a familiar (to some of us old-timers) situation: The medical model here in Fremont County has evolved back to where it once was – i.e., one owner and one manager for both hospitals, with the Lander hospital being strongly favored by ownership. Now, I'm sure Sage West will dispute this position, but one has only to look at the contrast between the two medical communities to understand that this is true.

How did this happen once again? After all, Riverton has the larger population, the only commercial airport in the County, the College and the Nursing School, and most of the small industry in the County. Why is the Riverton medical community once again suffering at the expense of that of Lander?

To some extent I think it boils down to geography and demographics. Many of our health care practitioners in Riverton have gotten older and have retired, or have died, or have moved on to greener pastures, while Lander's medical community has had great success in recruiting doctors, nurses, and ancillary staff to build the industry and/or replace those who retire or move on. Many young doctors are actively looking for practice locations to better suit their active lifestyles, and a town nearer the mountains is more attractive to them than one twenty five miles further away.

But here's the "elephant in the room:" now that we're back to one hospital owner/manager, Sage West continues to recruit, but apparently has decided to bolster the medical community at the Lander campus, to the detriment of the Riverton campus.

Alan Daugherty's open letter in the Riverton Ranger on September 9<sup>th</sup> suggests that Life Point/Sage West has no plans to diminish services here in Riverton – in fact, he states in his letter that "We have decided to continue to offer at Riverton all services we *currently provide there today* –from emergency, medical/surgical and intensive care services to imaging and diagnostic lab services." I dispute his statement. We have no urgent or emergent surgical program here; no anesthesia providers reside in Riverton, and only *elective* surgeries are performed here, no more than once weekly. The ICU is being used as a medical non-critical patient care facility (i.e., patients who would normally be placed in a non-intensive care bed) because there is insufficient staff to open the normal med/surg nursing units. When my wife was recently hospitalized in Riverton for a non-critical medical condition, she had to go to the ICU: there were only 5 or 6 inpatients in the whole hospital, so the normal med/surg beds and nursing stations were closed down and all of the (5 or 6) inpatients went to the ICU. If these are the services they "*currently provide there today*," we deserve much better .

Incidentally, we still have no capability to type and crossmatch blood in the Riverton hospital lab; and despite the fact that Riverton has a larger and demographically younger population than Lander, Mr. Daugherty has categorically stated that Life Point/Sage West has no plans to return Ob/Gyn services to Riverton.

Mr. Daugherty has thrown us a bone, and perhaps we should see how that goes. But we desire *action*, not just *words* .We've been in this situation before, albeit several decades ago. We "old timers" experienced the "Charlie Brown/Lucy and the football" meme in the remote past and we learned to subscribe to the axiom "Fool me once, your mistake; fool me twice, *my* mistake." If Sage West is unable to deliver full services once again to the Riverton campus, we may need to somehow divorce ourselves from them in order to get back to healthy, active competition for health care provision in Fremont County. We did it once – it wasn't easy, and in fact the effort to get out from under LHHS management involved an anti-trust lawsuit that took us to Federal court in Cheyenne to get the desired result – but we got it done, and medical care throughout Fremont County was better served by the change.

I believe that if we want a healthy, robust health care delivery system in Riverton, we'll have to bite the bullet and be aggressive in pressing for it. That won't make us popular with our neighbors in Lander, but it may be the only way to keep Riverton's growth and economy alive. After all – how many businesses, small industries, and families will want to establish in a town that may have a commercial airport, expanding small industry, a college and nursing school, but minimal (read: inadequate) local health care? A community with no Ob/Gyn services, no full-time pediatric, surgical, or orthopedic care; a hospital with incomplete laboratory services, and a paucity of health care providers (nursing staff, aides, ancillary services and doctors) to the point that only seven or eight inpatients can be served at any one time due to lack of staff? If Riverton is to survive as a viable Wyoming community and a great place to live and raise a family, we'd better get started on a program to return adequate medical services to our home town.

Kent Stockton M.D. (Retired)