

The Changing Landscape of Healthcare and the Need to Focus on Local Geography

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The theme of this edition of the Delaware Journal of Public Health is “Place Matters: Geography and Health.” It is a most appropriate topic of public discourse following our recent experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Upon my arrival in March 2020 as the new President & CEO of Beebe Healthcare in Sussex County, Delaware, I had the opportunity to see the landscape of healthcare with an outsider’s perspective during a crisis that we have not seen in generations. And as a member of the Sussex County community for almost three years, I clearly see the impact of geography on healthcare – landmarks like the Mispillion River, the Chesapeake Bay, the beaches of the coast, and even the rapidly evolving distribution of farmland and residential developments – all have changed how Beebe Healthcare has changed the way we are delivering healthcare services to our community.

For Beebe Healthcare, geography is part of our heritage – our DNA. In 1916, two brothers – Drs. James and Richard Beebe – returned home after attending medical school in Philadelphia to open a hospital to serve the people living a significant distance from cities with more healthcare options.

Over a hundred years later, Beebe Healthcare – now an integrated healthcare delivery system – is still providing local care for people who live, visit, work, and seek care here in southern Delaware. During the pandemic, we mobilized resources to ensure that the community had dependable quality healthcare that they could rely on for COVID care and all the other services needed to live in our geographic region.

And as Beebe Healthcare’s Board and Leadership now launch our new five-year strategic plan, the emphasis will still be on the care of our community as defined by geography – Sussex County. We refer to our plan as “One Beebe,” emphasizing our commitment to focus the combined efforts of our hospitals, clinics, emergency rooms, walk-in care sites, providers of our medical staff, nursing school, residency training program, and medical foundation – every part of Beebe Healthcare – on caring for the people who live in, work in, and visit our county. We will develop and implement new technologies and advanced methods to care for the people who need care in our geographic region. And even though people may access healthcare in different ways – on a digital device, in new medical office and hospitals, free standing emergency departments and cancer centers, and even admitted to your own home for inpatient care – we will ensure that the compassionate and personalized care people have received from their local community health system, often delivered by family, friends, or neighbors, will continue.

But it’s not just healthcare that is influenced by our geography. It is also about health. And Beebe’s strategic plan is also focused on improving the health of the people who live in Sussex County. And, in many ways, this is what excites me about the future of Beebe Healthcare and Sussex County.

Because our geography also defines, in many ways, the health of the people who live, work, and visit here. The diversity of density of homes and populations impact access – not just to

healthcare – but to other important determinants of health like places to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables, clean water, internet and wi-fi, and opportunities for social and community interaction. As our population ages, the need to connect people with social and emotional support and opportunities to address issues such as depression, anxiety, and dementia grow, and our geography can sometimes make that a challenge.

A healthcare system, even one as committed to focusing on our county as Beebe, cannot address these issues alone. In order to improve the health of our community, collaboration and cooperation are critical. Improving the community’s health will require close alignment with important organizations like First State Community Action Agency, La Red, La Esperanza, the Nanticoke Indian Tribe, and many more. We must work together with local government, our schools, nonprofit organizations, and other healthcare systems to align on health improvement targets and seek consensus on what collective impacts we can make together. Ideas like transforming our community into a “Blue Zone” or increasing economic opportunities by focusing on healthcare and education growth to combat poverty and housing will require working together.

Senator Tip O’Neill of Massachusetts used to say that “all politics is local.” And all health is “local.” As the only health system headquartered in Sussex County for over a century, Beebe Healthcare will be relentless in our efforts to “be the partner of choice” for people who are driven to make our geographic region healthier.

All three counties of Delaware have unique geographic features that have impacted the population and their health. For centuries, the people of Sussex County and what they did were shaped by our geography. The land provided opportunities for farming and agriculture. The ocean, bays, and rivers made access to waterways a boon for fishing and industrial development. And the beauty of our coasts has brought greater development and growth. Healthcare as an industry – as a profession – must refocus our efforts to serve our local communities, often defined by our geographies, and work together with others to align, collaborate, and cooperate to improve the health of the people we serve.

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