

Dr. Otter is suffering from a case of denial

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter must think he knows more about medicine than the people who actually went to medical school.

Because the people who practice medicine in the Gem State fear he's just condemned 78,000 Idahoans who can't afford private health insurance to more misery and even death.

Unlike their fellow citizens in 32 states and the District of Columbia, these low-income working adults are not eligible for Medicaid because the GOP-led Legislature won't allow it.

For three years, Republican lawmakers have said no .

No to saving hundreds of lives every year.

No to saving taxpayers millions of dollars every year.

This year, legislative resistance seemed to crack but lawmakers went home having accomplished nothing.

As governor, Otter could use his executive authority to implement Medicaid expansion. He's sticking by his 2010 pledge not to do so.

Otter also refuses to lay the groundwork for the 2017 legislative session by applying for a federal waiver Idaho would require to come up with its own Medicaid-financed plan.

Waiting for lawmakers to come up with their own waiver puts the decision off until next spring. And if legislators come up with something complicated, negotiations with the feds could drag out even longer.

All of which could delay changing Idaho's Medicaid eligibility laws until the early months of 2018 - well into the final year of Otter's third term.

Not to worry, Otter says.

"The idea that people are dying because they don't have health care in Idaho, I don't totally agree with that," Otter said.

How does he know?

Has he not read a 2014 study published in the Annals of Internal Medicine showing mandatory health care coverage in Massachusetts - the precursor to Obamacare - cut the state's death rate by 3 percent.

You can surmise fewer people died because they got help early and often for chronic diseases - high blood pressure, diabetes or mental illness. Obtain the same results in Idaho and you would see 450 fewer people succumbing

to premature death.

Has he not examined the list of cases covered by Idaho's Catastrophic Health Care system? Sen. Dan Schmidt, D-Moscow, a physician and, until recently a member of the CAT board, compiled more than 120 cases for December alone.

He found at least eight - including five deaths - involving patients who would have qualified for the preventive health care Medicaid expansion offers.

"There are so many reasons why our current indigent and catastrophic system is wrong," Schmidt wrote. "I will let you decide if it is killing people. But I can see a way out of this drought. And we are in one, can't you see?"

Has Otter not heard of Jenny Steinke? She put off getting help for her chronic asthma because she couldn't afford it - and wound up dying in an Idaho Falls hospital.

One of Steinke's doctors, Kenneth Krell, put together a list of 21 Medicaid Gap patients who required treatment in the intensive care unit for the first 53 days of this year. Among them were people suffering from pneumonia, diabetic ketascidois, chronic obstructive pulmonary

disease and sepsis.

"The variety of the patients and the cases struck me," Krell told the Post Register's Luke Ramseth. "It cuts across a wide spectrum of patients who hopefully - if we had Medicaid expansion and better mental health care - might've gotten care and avoided a tragic (result)."

That's part of the reason why Krell holds legislative inaction on Medicaid responsible for hundreds of patient deaths.

Refuting Krell directly, Otter said, "I think the doctor was off-base. I see plenty of people that die every day in hospitals and they have insurance, and they're in the hospital, but they still die."

People with insurance die in hospitals.

What does that prove?

Someone with insurance who has pneumonia is going to worry about getting well.

Someone without insurance who has pneumonia is going to worry about paying the bills - and possibly wait too long before getting help.

How can Idaho's governor live with that on his conscience one day longer than necessary?

