

On My Mind  
12/05/03

Should the governor declare an emergency in the state of health care for the people of the CNMI?

With the abrupt and total suspension of CHC's family clinic operation, health care for the people of the CNMI has been seriously curtailed. People with ailments that are not life-threatening can no longer get treatment at the Commonwealth Health Center. Patients with chronic conditions can no longer get periodic check-ups at CHC. People due for annual health exams cannot get them at CHC. What's worse, there is no follow-up treatment for people seen in the emergency room. There are no referrals for people seen in the emergency room. There are no means for doctors to determine whether treatment or medication prescribed in the emergency room is helping or whether further adjustments are needed. There is no out-patient care.

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The community has been told to use other medical facilities on island. But there's been no information provided as to which facility takes government health insurance, which take Medicare. There's been no assurance that each of the several health care clinics in the CNMI are accredited, are staffed by certified physicians, meet health care standards. Apparently, none of the facilities are authorized to accept Medicaid patients.

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Then there's the question of medical records. They are not available on demand at CHC. Often it takes a week or more to obtain them. If one is ill, and needs to see a doctor, having to wait a week for medical records is ludicrous. To force people to see doctors who have no knowledge of the persons's medical history, prior treatment, or current medications is fair to neither patient nor doctor. In fact, it could be downright life-threatening.

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Does this present a health care crisis for the hundreds of people who would normally be seen and treated at the CHC Family Clinic every week? It most certainly does. Will the governor do anything about it? Only time will tell.

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The crisis at CHC is due to a lack of doctors - a lack of family practitioners, to be exact. Family practitioners are trained to treat most general ailments of the general public. They are trained to consider the whole person, and to look for solutions to ailments in the interactions of the parts of the body as a whole. Internists, on the other hand, are trained to look only at the specific areas in which they have received special training - ear, nose and throat, or pulmonary diseases, or renal conditions. Often, they have limited training and limited experience in treating the day-to-day aches and pains of the general public.

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Unfortunately, not only are there no family practitioners at CHC - and there have not been for quite some time - there are now only four internists. The number of pediatric physicians and emergency room physicians is not clear - but obviously, it is not enough to take care of the normal patient load at CHC.

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Why is there a shortage of doctors? Apparently, there are two reasons: doctors who have come

to the CNMI with every intention of working their full tour at CHC have been treated shabbily and have not stayed, and the lack of active, professional recruitment. Concern was once expressed about the wisdom of a practicing physician taking on the administrative responsibilities of running a department. Unfortunately, it would appear that those concerns were well-founded.

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Once again, the misguided management practice of promoting individuals by taking them from the field and giving them administrative positions has been proved wrong. A good teacher does not necessarily make a good principal. The classroom loses, and nothing is gained. So, here, a good doctor does not necessarily make a good administrator. The patients lose, and nothing is gained.

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I haven't seen the petition - rumored as being circulated - that calls for recall of the governor, but if I did, I'd be tempted to sign it if for no other reason than that I could then initiate a petition for the recall of the person who would become lieutenant governor. Under the CNMI Constitution, if a governor is recalled, the Lt. governor becomes the acting governor and the president of the Senate becomes the acting Lt. governor. And we all know who the president of the Senate is.....

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However, if the acting Lt. governor were recalled, then the position would appear to fall to the speaker of the House. Which looks like it could be former speaker Benigno S. Fitial.

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But all may not be lost. The Constitution provides that if more than a year in the term of office of the recalled official (governor or Lt. governor) remains, he or she may only hold office until a special election for the office is held. The trick would be to conduct the recall of the acting Lt. governor before the special election to fill the governor's seat was held and before the acting Lt. governor returned to his position as president of the Senate.

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If the acting governor (i.e., Diego Benavente) were to run for governor in that special election, there would also have to be an election to replace the acting Lt. governor. But unless the Senate president ran for that position - an unlikely scenario - he would be free to return to being Senate president.

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There is, however, another, prior, hurdle. According to the CNMI Constitution, once a recall petition is certified, it must be approved by two-thirds of the eligible voters at the next general election - unless a law calling for an earlier special election is passed by the legislature. The next general election is two years away - too late for the recall move to have much effect. On the other hand, it's pretty clear that no law approving a special election will pass the legislature so long as the unholy Babauta/Manglona alliance remains in place.

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In effect, then, dreams, wishes, and complicated scenarios aside, there does not seem to be any point in conducting the recall except as a signal to the governor of the extent of the dissatisfaction and disappointment in his performance to date. Which might be worth the effort

all on its own.

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Senator Pete P. Reyes' proposal that each of the senatorial districts keep 80% of the revenue it generates (instead of the revenue going into the general fund as it does now) and contribute only the remaining 20% of its revenue to the general fund is certainly a novel idea. But without more data on just what the impact of such an approach would be on the infrastructure of the three islands - and on what is now supported by the general fund - his idea should remain a topic of discussion, not a topic of legislation, or of an initiative.

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Though the behavior of the Senate president and his cronies has only exacerbated the uneasy truce that seems always to have plagued the three islands, taking punitive action is not the answer. At this point, Saipan could perhaps exist on its own, but the other two could not. It is in the interests of all three to find ways to work together. What appear to be needed - on an inter-generational level - are some serious trust-building/strengthening exercises among the three, along with heavy doses of the values and benefits of sharing, of brother/sisterhood, and of trust.

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The reality is that in multi-island nations, some subsidy by the larger of the smaller is unavoidable. The correlative reality is that there is more strength in unity than in disunity.

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Short takes:<br>

<b></b> Interest in the Sugar Dock renovation and Saipan-Tinian ferry project is growing by leaps and bounds, as they say. A web site at <a href="http://www.savesugardock.org">www.savesugardock.org</a> has been developed, and e-mails among interested parties have been flooding in-boxes. The project is on the agenda of the 12/9 meeting of CRMO Agencies, scheduled for 9 a.m. and a public hearing has been set for 12/22 at 6:30 p.m. at the multi-purpose center in Susupe. Stay tuned....

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<b></b> Earlier this week the governor apparently sent a note to the Senate president a note suggesting that his suspension of Saipan's three and Tinian's one senator be revoked. It certainly took him a long time to reach the conclusion that as governor, indeed he does have a role to play in "unify[ing] the community in times of disagreements." The belatedness of his awakening to that fact undercuts any sincerity his statement may have meant to convey.

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Too bad the governor doesn't take his role in "unifying the community" seriously enough to take some positive action in that regard (see suggestions above).

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<b></b> Monday is Constitution Day - the second most important day in the Commonwealth's history - Covenant Day being the first. It offers a prime opportunity to honor and celebrate the provisions of the CNMI government's founding document. Yet again, however, there have been no observances or ceremonies announced - it's just another day off for government employees.

How sad.

