

# Getting healthy appetite for health

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When it comes time to assess the impact of President Barack Obama's agenda on Memphis, the scorecard won't be toting up stimulus spending, the Memphis share of the defense budget, or even the Memphis bank bailouts. No, in Memphis the Obama legacy will be decided on health care.



Because we're an unhealthy city. We're fat. We're unfit. We don't eat our vegetables.

When diabetes kicks in, we don't have enough primary care doctors to tell us to change our ways.

When our hearts give out, the first-line doctors already have maxed out on the number of patients they can see who can't pay. Ditto for emergency rooms at Methodist, Baptist and The Med.

Bad health and rising costs make Memphis the kind of place where health care reform would make a big difference.

But is the city engaged in this debate? Are the political leaders talking about it? Are you talking about it?

The fact is, healthy living isn't high enough on agendas here.

We're the barbecue capital of America, not the tofu capital.

We're the reason why Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises decided not to sell grilled chicken here. No market.

True, we sell Big Ass beers on Beale, but huge swaths of city residents live in neighborhoods where no stores sell tomatoes, carrots or strawberries.

Figuring out how to make Memphis healthier, how to provide better medical care, how to lower costs while

simultaneously bringing tens of thousands of low-income Memphians under some kind of health plan isn't easy.

Places like Memphis are the reason why Obama, the Congress, and the big brains at national insurance companies, hospital groups and medical associations are flopping around like a mud wrestling tournament for cats.

Despite all of this, Memphis does have a reform model taking shape that might offer some guidance on how to get diverse interests aligned behind the flag of improving health care.

Over the last five years, the Healthy Memphis Common Table has slowly and deliberately built the very kind of health coalition that Congress hopes to craft among insurance companies, doctors, churches, businesses, neighborhood groups and quality assurance experts.

Maybe in D.C. they can't come together. But in Memphis, they have.

And, just as Obama last week was urging the nation to take a step on health care reform, the Healthy Memphis Common Table announced its local Take Charge for Better Health project.

The project is designed to give you and me and every Memphian better tools for managing our health -- and our health care.

In just a few weeks, the Take Charge for Better Health project will release results of a first-ever rating system of more than 200 doctors and 49 medical groups around Memphis.

The ratings, based on surveys filled out by 50,000 Medicare patients, will rate doctors on such things as how well local doctors communicate their heart and diabetes treatments, how well they explain prescriptions and whether they touch on preventive health while interacting with the patients.

The docs also will be rated on their listening skills, verbal communication and the accessibility of their offices.

"I'm amazed at the amount of cooperation we have had on this issue," said Renee Frazier, HMCT executive director. "Everybody involved in health care is working with us, at the table."

It's taken five years of talking, cajoling and building levels of trust, but today the Memphis health care community is pulling together. And the potential of this collaborative is huge.

"I'm confident we're on the road to becoming one of America's most healthy cities," said Frazier.

Memphis? One of America's healthiest cities?

That's a big idea.

HMCT can't do it all. To get there will require some changes at the national level. The incentive system that pays doctors must change. More money for primary care, more money to cover the costs of low-income patients, probably less emphasis on elective procedures and specialists.

A simple shift of channeling more people to a primary care doctor at his office would save billions in emergency room costs and unnecessary tests at specialized clinics. It's a back-to-the-future solution, something that Americans in the 1940s and 1950s always assumed was the way to go.

And there is the politics of it all. Not everyone wants Obama to succeed. And many of his own party worry that big reforms carry big risks with some interest groups back home.

But in Memphis we're trying to avoid just that.

The various interest groups have come together at the Healthy Memphis Common Table to seek common ground -- a healthier city.

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## **Chris Peck**

Chris Peck joined The Commercial Appeal as editor in December 2002. He oversees all news operations at the newspaper and serves on the executive management team. Prior to coming to Memphis he was the Belo Distinguished Chair in Journalism at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. Before that he was editor of The Spokesman-Review in Spokane. He and his brother own some small newspapers in Wyoming. Chris is married to Kate Duignan and they have two children.