



MISSOURI SENATE

JEFFERSON CITY

Wes Shoemyer
18th Senate District

CAPITOL BUILDING, ROOM 434
JEFFERSON CITY, MO 65101

**A Weekly Column for the
Week of October 26, 2009**

**Capitol Office
(573) 751-7852**

Healthy Missourians 2020

JEFFERSON CITY – As a farmer, I often have to think ahead several months when making decisions about what to plant or when to harvest. Are crop prices expected to rise or fall later in the year? Would it be better to plant more corn than beans? Should I store my grain until prices improve or sell now in case prices drop even more? By thinking ahead and trying to anticipate market trends, we can reduce some of the risks inherent in farming. We can't prepare for everything that might happen, but if we gather as much information as possible before making the big decisions, we usually come out ahead.

That's the kind of thinking behind a group of committees created by the Missouri Senate during the past legislative session: the Missouri Senate Job Creation 2020 Committee, the Educated Citizenry 2020 Committee, and the Healthy Missourians 2020 Committee. These committees are charged with defining where Missouri should be in the areas of job creation, healthcare, and education in the year 2020. The Senate is beginning its long-term focus on these three areas because these issues are where our state lacks in comparison to the nation — Missouri ranks 33rd in median family income, our state ranks 38th in the nation regarding our health status, and Missouri ranks 30th in the number of 25-34 year olds with a degree past high school. Obviously, we can and we must do better in all three areas.

I serve on the Healthy Missourians 2020 Committee, which held a public hearing this week in St. Louis. Our job is to create a vision of Missouri's health care system that promotes healthier, longer, and more productive lives. We are working to develop a long-term strategy to provide health coverage for the more than 700,000 Missourians who remain uninsured, while also trying to find ways to control the rising cost of health care. The committee is currently focused on four key concepts: improving the health status of Missourians; wellness

and prevention strategies; healthy workforce initiatives and health literacy; and long-term care issues (seniors and disabled citizens). I want to talk about health literacy, which seemed to be a recurring theme during the discussion of each key concept.

Basically, health literacy simply means having the ability to understand health care information and to use that information to make good decisions about your health and medical care. Poor health literacy is usually associated with poor health. For example, our committee heard from a pharmacist who said more than 50 percent of patients do not understand how to take their medications or fail to follow their doctor's instructions, often because they don't understand those directions.

A critical part of increasing health literacy is to simplify the language of health care. A patient is more likely to understand he or she has "high blood pressure" as opposed to "hypertension." If you don't understand what your doctor is telling you, how can you make reasonable decisions about your health? The importance of health literacy increases as our population ages. Approximately 80 percent of all seniors have at least one chronic condition, and if they do not understand what their doctor tells them, they cannot manage their condition effectively. Medicare enrollees with low health literacy are less likely to receive preventive care such as vaccines and screenings.

Health Literacy Missouri is an initiative that seeks to improve health literacy in our state by increasing access to "plain language" health information, working with health care providers on effective communications skills, forming educational and community partnerships, and advocating the importance of health literacy.

Health care is an issue that impacts all of our lives, and it's important that we all learn to become better health care consumers. Don't be afraid to ask questions when you visit your physician and ask your doctor to explain the medical terms he uses. Also, make sure you understand the instructions you receive from your pharmacist about your prescription medications. By improving health literacy we can all help reduce the rising cost of health care while leading healthier, more productive lives.

If you have any questions or comments about this or any other issue, give my Capitol office a call at (573) 751-7852, send me an email at wes.shoemyer@senate.mo.gov, or drop a line to Room 434, State Capitol, 201 West Capitol Ave., Jefferson City, MO 65101.