

Welcome to Minnesota. I hope that you're not stuck in this conference all day. I want you to get out and see this great city ... and that's an order!

I understand you are all here from Governor's offices from the Midwest and beyond. Go back and tell your boss that this Governor is alive and kicking and even sounds a little bit like a health care policy wonk ... I know it will be hard for some of them to take. But that's because in my Administration we've got smart people doing good things.

When I was elected almost 18 months ago, I stood alone.

I had no party caucus in the Legislature

I had no interest groups pushing for one reform or another.

I had no major donors pushing me to hire this person or that person.

All I had was common sense and a desire to do the right thing for the people of Minnesota. One of the first things I did was to hire people around me who knew their stuff. I hired Jan Malcolm as Commissioner of Health & Michael O'Keefe as Commissioner of Human Services. I hired them, got out of their way and let them do their work. I only gave them a few basic principles to follow.

First, I want an accountable, responsive and limited government.

Second, people need to take responsibility for their own actions. That means that no person IS EVER done learning.

And Third, I want people involved in their government. I want their voices heard, I want to hear from the silent majority.

You are probably wondering how principles like "personal responsibility" and "limited government" work when it comes to health policy. The more I learned about Medicaid, Medicare, Minnesota Care, Charity Care, CHIP, and MFIP the more I wondered how these principles could ever apply. None of it seemed "simple" or limited.

Well let me tell you, personal responsibility and limited government should apply even more strongly when it comes to health care.

Why? Because for too long personal responsibility has been left out of the mix. Let me give you some examples of what I mean and then I can turn things over to Commissioner Malcom for details.

First lets take the tobacco settlement dollars.

States got tobacco money for one reason; because of a lawsuit. That means we have a RESPONSIBILITY to use the money to make an investment in the health of the people. That does not mean the health of our pocketbook through tax cuts, nor the health of the state budget for roads or bridges. It means the health of people.

It was important to me to protect this money and keep it available to serve Minnesotans in the future. So we created three endowments where only the interest earnings will be spent. The principal remains untouched, so it can keep on generating revenue.

Two of the endowments are all about personal responsibility.

The Youth Risk Behavior endowment is all about making better health choices. Its purpose is to focus on a variety of "risky behaviors" for kids such as unprotected sex, illegal drugs and alcohol.

Government's job is to get young people the right info in a way that's meaningful to them. Then, it's up to the kid and their parent to take responsibility.

The biggest endowment is the Youth Tobacco Prevention Endowment. Its mission is very basic ... prevent young people from getting addicted to tobacco.

As you know, about 90 percent of adults who got addicted to tobacco, did so while they were teenagers or younger. I was one those kids. I started chewing tobacco and quitting was the hardest thing I ever did.

Instead of continuing to have the government lecture teens, we're turning control over to teenagers themselves. Teens talking to other teens in their own style. That's what this is all about. We simply amplify their voice and hope that other teens will take the message to heart and make better informed, responsible choices for themselves

That's at the heart of one of my strongest beliefs about self-sufficiency. And it's an example of how my administration tries to put my beliefs into practice.

Another big health priority in my administration is trying to improve the health system for the future. A pretty big task ... especially when I want to make sure we follow the principles of a limited, responsive government AND keep people on the hook for being personally responsible for their actions.

When I talk about health system reform, I'm not just talking about health plans, doctors and hospitals. I'm talking about people and their choices. It's not just government's job or the health care system's job to make you healthy. It's your job.

I want a health system that encourages personal responsibility and helps people make healthy choices. We don't need fancy research to tell us that if people take care of themselves it will be cheaper for the public in the long run.

Just this week, the World Health Organization said that life expectancy in the U.S. ranks 24th, well behind Japan and Australia.

And you know what's really sad?

We spend more on health here in the U.S. than any other place on earth...at least 50 percent more on a per- person basis.

Is 24th place the best we can do for all that money?

I would like to think the United States could do better than that ... maybe if we took our own health more seriously we would do better ... that's where personal responsibility comes in.

The personal choices we make have a direct impact on our health care system. Unhealthy behaviors lead to unnecessary costs.

About half the money we spend on health care is the result of unhealthy choices,

whether it's the choice to smoke;

the choice to drink and drive;

the choice to eat unhealthy foods;

the choice not to exercise;

or the choice to drive without a seat belt.

Now, of course, we can't prevent OR legislate against all the bad choices people make. We can help people understand the connection between choices and costs and maybe give them stronger incentives to make better choices.

It should be clear to you by now, that this whole area of health policy needs more courageous leadership than its been getting.

To me, courageous leadership means telling the truth to the public and being willing to make judgements and choices rather than just putting off hard decisions for a later day, which never seems to come.

I personally admire the kind of leadership former Governor Dick Lamm brought to the health care debate. Gov. Lamm has had some pretty strong words on this topic.

He calls inactivity by us political types "*public policy malpractice*" because Politicians like to do what's nice, not what's necessary.

Necessary costs money and that's OK, cause that's Government's job.
But guess what ... NICE COSTS EVEN MORE MONEY AND BUYS US LESS.

While much of the action in health policy has been at the state level, we need to demand better federal leadership too. The federal government's role in health care is critical.

I want the next round of presidential and congressional debates to highlight health care issues, especially medicare. Let's talk about some ideas for change that we can understand and actually implement! The program has to be modernized.

There it is, those themes of personal responsibility, self-sufficiency and a limited responsive government can be incorporated in developing a health system for the future.

Now, do I sound like a health policy wonk or what????

With that, let me turn things over to my Commissioner of Health, Jan Malcolm for some remarks on our work in Minnesota ...