

*Remarks for the  
Tupelo Health Summit  
August 21, 2001*

Good morning, and welcome to the second of three scheduled summits on health care in Mississippi.

Let me begin by thanking Mayor Otis and Dr. Trotter for their work in putting this summit together. Thanks are also due to Dr. Ed Thompson and his staff in Jackson for their great work in making today possible.

Our efforts here are focused on the issues that affect the people of the Mississippi and their personal health – specifically, on heart health, diabetes, obesity and physical activity.

The statistics show there is room for improvement. Mississippians have one of the highest heart disease death rates, as well as one of the highest percentages of diabetes.

Obesity is an increasingly common problem, as is the growing number of adults who don't exercise in their leisure time.

We are doing so much to improve the lives of Mississippians in terms of education, economic development and technology. All of these, however, cannot succeed without a healthy population. That's the challenge for us today.

We hear all the talk about eating right, exercising, and avoiding destructive habits such as alcohol and tobacco. And in the South, there is a culture that has been raised on blue-plate specials, where the only exercise has been hard work.

Well, we know that eating right matters. Some would argue with that – Tommy Smothers once remarked that “red meat is not bad for you; it’s the blue-green meat you have to watch out for.”

But, the health of our people is so important to the growth and success of our state. We must do all we can to educate the public about health issues, and we must also make sure that each and every Mississippian has access to health care.

A few weeks ago, I unveiled a proposal to take part of our annual tobacco payments, use it to maximize available federal dollars, and increase our spending on health care.

A quick point of explanation here – I do not want to touch the principal of the tobacco trust fund, which is prohibited by law. I want the fund to continue to grow.

However, I do want to see us do everything possible to make the most of the available federal dollars that are out there for our people.

There are tremendous opportunities for us in the area of health care, and by aggressively going after available federal dollars, we can make a difference for the people of Mississippi.

I want us to bring together the best minds – from the Legislature, from the health care field, from Washington – to develop a plan of action.

If we take just a portion of the annual tobacco payment – not the trust fund, but the payment – and use it to capture matching federal dollars, we can take on the issues we're talking about here today.

We could find ways to get more federal funding for screening for health problems such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease.



We could improve access to health care in rural areas. Perry County lost a hospital last month; over 30 other hospitals around the state are at risk. This cannot happen.

We could develop ambulance services in rural areas as well. Too many people are put at risk when they don't have emergency services nearby to respond to their needs.

There are so many possibilities.

The Secretary of Health and Human Services, Tommy Thompson, was a fellow governor before going to Washington. I have already talked with him about our ideas, and he has assigned a staff person to work with us to develop and flesh out a proposal that will have a positive impact on the people of our state.

And, the proposal I have laid out is in keeping with the spirit of the tobacco settlement – we want to use the money on health care.

I unveiled this proposal five months before the legislative session, so there would be time to discuss it and explore every avenue for maximizing the federal funds.

The legislative leadership and the attorney general have expressed a spirit of cooperation on this issue, and I know they also want to do what is right and best for Mississippians.

This state is blessed with many treasures, but at the end of the day, her greatest resource is her people. And if we are to reach our potential, we need healthy people.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that “the first wealth is health.” As we work to bring new companies to Mississippi and expand the companies already here, we are seeing that health care is important to these businesses.

Not only do they want the best health care for their employees, they want a healthy workforce from the beginning. For them, that's just good business.

Health matters to Mississippi. It matters to its business, it matters to its quality of life, but most importantly, it matters to its people. We cannot afford to risk our greatest natural resource.

I appreciate the opinions and input that will be shared today as part of this health summit. We have experts from around the country here to provide their insight, and I know they will have much to offer.

As you leave this summit today, I want each of you to think about how we can make a difference in the lives of people across this state. Share those thoughts – with your local health care providers, with your local media. Share them with me.

Mississippi is poised to do great things.

States around the country are taking notice of what's happening here, and we are emerging as a leader among our neighbors.

If we are to reach our full potential, we need a healthy population. We need creative thinking. We need to make the most of our greatest natural resources.

Let's make that potential a reality. Let's work together for our families, our state, our future.

Thank you for the work being done here today.