



An interview with Senator Scott

Longtime Legislator Reflects on Journey of Medicine in Wyoming

The Wyoming Medical Society sat down with Sen. Charles Scott at the Capitol in March

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Sen. Charles Scott poses for a picture in the Capitol Complex during the final week of the 2022 Wyoming Legislative Session.
PHOTO BY KELLY ETZEL DOUGLAS

State Senator Charles Scott, R-Natrona County, is the longest-consecutive-serving state senator in Wyoming (44 years) and the son of Casper's first pediatrician, Oliver Scott, MD.

A steadfast legislator interested in health issues, Sen. Scott recently sat down with Wyoming Medical Society Executive Director Sheila Bush and Wyoming Medicine Editor-in-Chief Rob Monger, MD, sharing his thoughts on several medical issues and the journey of medicine in the state upon the arrival of his family to Casper in 1948. About 10 years later, a diphtheria outbreak occurred in Casper, which he recalled.

SCOTT:

I was in junior high at the time, and it came on top of a flu epidemic. There were six cases of kids who hadn't been vaccinated. The doctors that treated the first cases didn't recognize it—they had never seen diphtheria before. He had, having internships and residency in urban areas, he'd seen it. So, he made the diagnosis. Six kids got it and three of them died. Every parent in town wanted to get their kid vaccinated—yesterday! The phone just rang off the hook, and he had a flu epidemic at the same time. It was just a madhouse! We went from, 'Aww, vaccinations,' to 'I want my kid vaccinated right now!' That was an eye-opening experience—junior high kid, I was starting to recognize things. That memory has always

stuck with me of what an outbreak of a really deadly disease would bring.... That experience stuck with me and is one that's guided a lot of my thinking on public health issues.

WMS:

How did Wyoming align with Utah and Creighton [before WWAMI]?

SCOTT:

I don't know how we got with them, but I remember we had it because we weren't producing any doctors of our own. We needed more doctors, and this was an attempt to get that. And they were reputable medical schools that cooperated with us. What happened was the University of Washington developed just a very good school and developed this WWAMI program where they were the medical school for Washington, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho. Dr. John Coombs—I think he was their dean—he came marketing. Dr. Malvin Cole was our neighbor at our original ranch ... and he invited me to come meet Dr. Coombs, who was here selling, that we ought to join WWAMI. It sounded to me like such a great deal. I was not a member when we had the big debate over a medical school for Wyoming—that was the year before I was elected. There were funds to start a medical school in the university budget ... there were 15 senators here, 13 Republicans and 2 Democrats, that

essentially swore a blood oath that they would not vote for that. They defeated the whole University of Wyoming budget—they weren't separate bills then ... and they defeated that over that issue. Just 15 votes. If any one of them had wavered, we would have had our own medical school.

WMS:

Did they tell you why they were so opposed to it?

SCOTT:

I didn't talk to them about it, but my dad had very strong views. He said we simply did not have the clinical resources in Wyoming that would be necessary to do a good medical school. He didn't know about the finances, but he said we don't have the clinical resources. This would produce third-rate doctors, and that's a mistake. He was fierce on the subject, and I think he was right.

WMS:

When Dr. Coombs came around to sell you on WWAMI, was there a lot of support for WWAMI? Did people want to switch?

SCOTT:

It made so much sense, because they were trying to train primary care doctors ... it's what we needed. The University of Washington—it's interesting; they are rated the top in the country in family medicine and in one of the other primary care specialties; I think it's internal medicine. They're rated tenth in the country in research ... That's a quality we just can't get on our own.... There were deficiencies in our undergraduate education programs such that they had difficulty getting Wyoming candidates to fill the quota at first. That caused the university to reform some of its undergraduate teaching ... The University of Wyoming is becoming a major school, real high quality, and pretty economical for students, and it's just been a steady improvement over the years.

WMS:

What about the residencies?

SCOTT:

Wyoming needs to do its share of medical education, in my opinion. Having the residencies does two things: it's a family practice residency—we do have the clinical resources to do that.... We would get a certain yield off it, it's not as good of a yield as off WWAMI in terms of doctors coming to practice here, but it's still pretty good. Residencies don't have as good a yield as the medical schools. We do better than the national average with WWAMI, a little less with the residencies. And having the experience of teaching residents and teaching WWAMI students, both of them do rotations around the state, and that is very good at keeping our doctors sharp. If you're

going to teach and you're going to teach an eager young person who's going to question you, 'Why do we do this? Why do we do this?' that improves the doctor that's doing the teaching. It's got to.

WMS:

What about funding for the residencies where they don't get funding from the federal government like other residencies?

SCOTT:

That was a screw-up when they first started. I wasn't involved with that—I don't know what happened, but we missed some deadlines because we thought, 'Ah, we've got plenty of money.' There was an oil boom going on ... and we've never been able to retrieve that. So, there's always been a problem.

WMS:

Talk about tort reform.

SCOTT:

I've never been enthusiastic about the legal system. We've had tort reform problems in this state primarily because of our court system. The system is totally ineffective as a quality control and has an incredible error rate.

WMS:

What's going to happen with Medicaid expansion [in Wyoming]?

SCOTT:

Medicaid is a very poor program. It actively encourages, the way it's set up, excessive utilization of very expensive healthcare and the emergency room. It doesn't pay very well, which is a problem, but it increases the excessive utilization—that's one strike against it. And that's fundamentally the design of it. Second thing is the poor payment ... a good deal less than private insurance pays. And so, there's a cost-shift ... and the cost-shift is high enough ... for a hospital, there's a break-even point; going all Medicaid reduces your revenue, even though it picks up the patients that can't pay.... So, for all [different] reasons, I'm opposed to it.

WMS:

Do you foresee a time when it will pass in Wyoming? Do you see the tide turning and they will pass Medicaid expansion at some point?

SCOTT:

Not as long as I'm here. The Senate killed it 24 to 6 this time.

The full interview with Sen. Charles Scott is available to watch on the Wyoming Medical Society's YouTube channel. You can find it by searching "Wyoming Medical Society" on YouTube, or through our website at www.wyomed.org.