

Let's talk health care:

Are farm communities deficient in physicians?

BY DEBBIE KOONTZ

LANCASTER — A recent study by the United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service reports that 138 counties in the United States — about 4.5 percent of all counties — lacked an active physician.

This means that about a half-million farmers and other residents of rural communities must leave their home counties to obtain professional health care.

This study, reported in the USDA's monthly publication *Farmline*, found that 86 of these counties have a sufficient population and income base to support a physician's practice but haven't yet enticed a doctor to set up an office there. The other 52 cannot do so without subsidies from the state, local or federal government.

Pa.'s situation

Pennsylvania is fortunate to have a least one doctor in each of its 67 counties. In fact, only one county — Sullivan — has as few as one doctor actively practicing within its borders, according to the American Medical Association's Physician Characteristics and Distribution in the U.S. report.

According to this report, five counties have less than 10 non-federal physicians practicing medicine in Pennsylvania. They are: Cameron, 3; Forest, 2; Fulton, 3; Juniata, 7; and Sullivan, 1.

In all, Pennsylvania has a total of 23,347 doctors, 22,098 of which are in active practice. But of these 23,347, only 3,219 have a general practice, making the idea of a family doctor seem close to extinction.

These statistics, when compared to the current Pennsylvania population, total 517 people for each physician. The national average is 515 for each physician.

Why low counts?

Though these statistics may seem alarming for many rural residents, it is wise to note that nonphysician and low-number physician counties, compared with other counties, tend to have smaller, sparser populations, with slower growth rates and lower per capita incomes.

Nearly all the U.S. nonphysician counties mentioned in the *Farmline* report above, are totally rural, with no towns exceeding 2,500 residents. In fact, 93 of these

counties have less than 4,000 people in the entire county.

Interesting to note on the Pennsylvania study, is the drastic difference arising from one county to another in physician statistics. For instance, Wayne County in extreme northeast Pennsylvania with physician statistics of a low 32, is bordered by all of Lackawanna County's eastern border and yet this latter county

supports 362 physicians. It seems impossible that two counties bordering each other could harbor such opposite statistics, but a closer look reveals that Lackawanna County is the home of Pennsylvania's fifth largest city — Scranton, with a total count of 91,503 residents.

The same difference occurs between the counties of Franklin and Fulton with physician

statistics of 130 and 3 respectively. The reason for the difference? The foothills of the Allegheny Mountains lie in Fulton County. Once you climb these foothills and reach the level western plateau, you see physician statistics growing: Bedford, at 28; Somerset with 55; Fayette, 119 and on to Pittsburgh's home county of Allegheny with 4,018 non-federal, actively practicing physicians.

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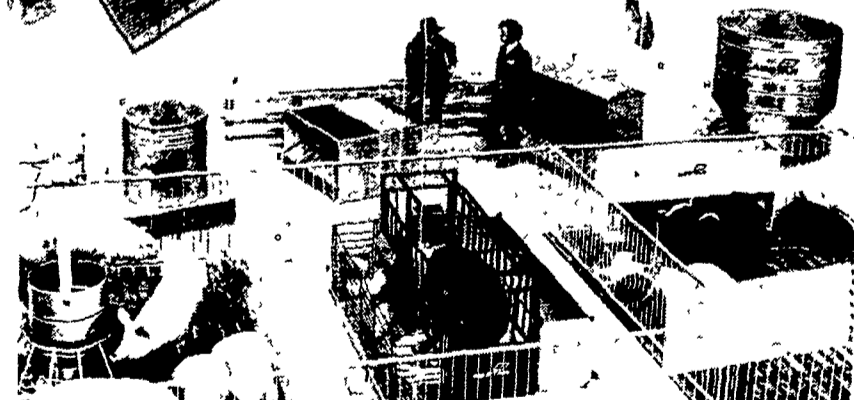
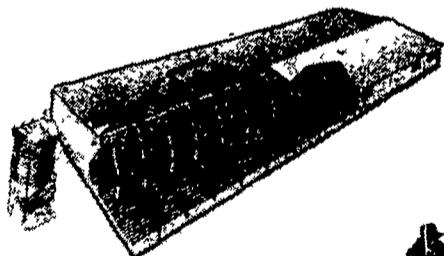
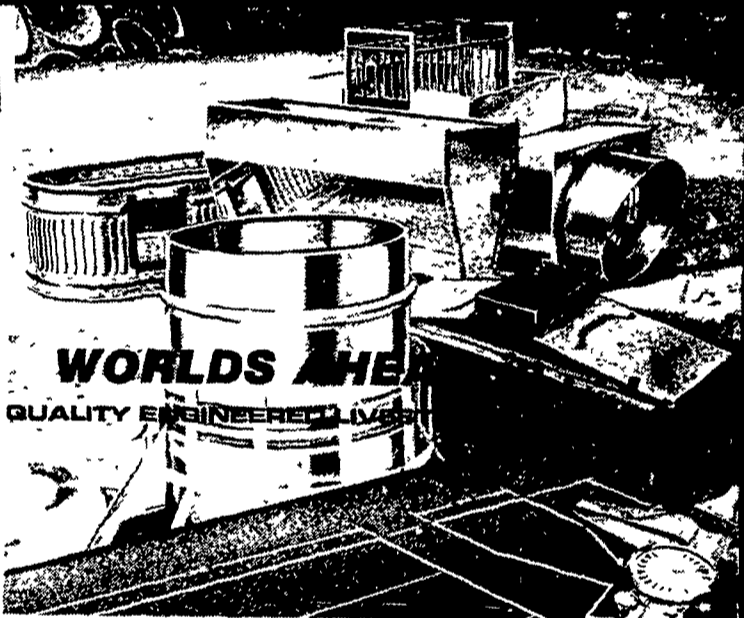
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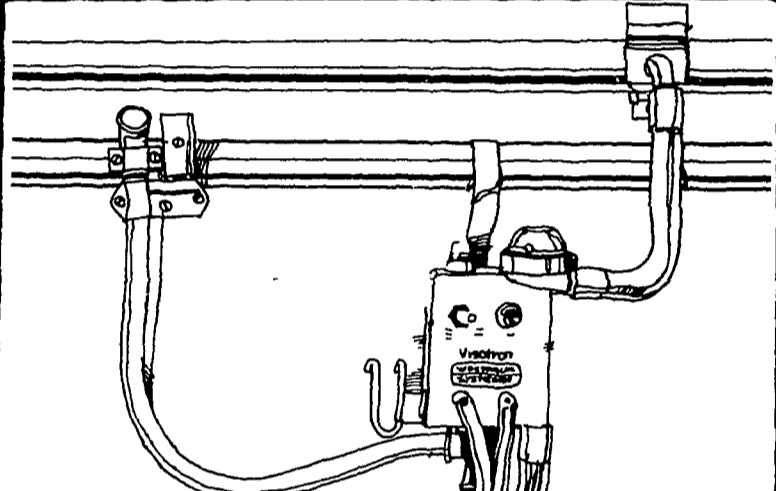
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