I read with trepidation the report that the Legislature decided to spend $5 million promoting “medical tourism.” I then cringed when I read further and saw that Miami and Jacksonville were being touted as the sites where presumably these funds would be spent.

Why? Because these two areas are among the most expensive places to get health care in the country. In addition, they are also have some of the poorest performances on health care quality. Is this really what the Legislature ought to be spending taxpayer money on when it refuses to expand health care for the poor?

The Dartmouth Atlas of Health Care (www.dartmouthatlas.org) is a public site where anyone can look up the cost and quality of care anywhere in the country. Year after year, Miami is the most expensive place to get health care in the U.S. The average cost per Medicare beneficiary in 2007 was $17,274 — nearly three times as much as the lowest-cost area, Rapid City, S.D. ($6,264). But, you’d respond, they have a lot more high-grade specialists in Miami, so the quality of care is fantastic. Unfortunately, you’d be wrong.

In fact, in general there is an inverse relationship between cost and quality. The highest-cost areas generally have the lowest quality, and the lowest-cost areas have the highest quality. Miami and Jacksonville score poorly in almost all accepted quality measures — diabetes management, access to primary care and number of days spent in a hospital at the end of life. Low cost places such as Portland, Ore., and Sioux Falls, S.D., have some of the highest-quality measures in the nation.

What the Legislature ought to be doing is looking at ways to improve health-care quality and access to care for all — and particularly for those in greatest need. Medicaid expansion, promoting health insurance for all able to pay for it, enhancing the number of primary care residencies in our own state so our medical students don’t have to go elsewhere would be a good place to start. I’ve got money, so if I want to take a tourist trip to get a medical procedure I’d choose to go to India or Singapore. But if I want to throw dollars in the money pit, Miami and Jacksonville are the places to do it.

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