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## Medicare Actuary Known for Strong Beliefs

By LYNETTE CLEMETSON

**W**ASHINGTON, March 14 — Richard S. Foster's disagreements with Medicare officials over projections of the costs of the program began almost as soon as he took over as its chief actuary in 1995.

Mr. Foster, a no-nonsense mathematician with a reputation for being careful in his assessments, delivered an estimate on the long-term condition of the Medicare trust fund that indicated worsening problems in the future financing of the program. Bruce C. Vladeck, who ran the program during the Clinton administration, said in a telephone interview on Sunday that he worried that Mr. Foster's outlook would fuel Republican efforts to cut Medicare benefits in the 1995-96 budget.

Hoping for a more optimistic take, Mr. Vladeck suggested to his new hire that the assumptions he had used in preparing the estimate of future income for the trust fund might have been too conservative. After several detailed debates with Mr. Foster on the issue, Mr. Vladeck conceded defeat.

"I lost," he said. "He's not volatile, not very emotional. But when he says X as opposed to Y, he already has a well-reasoned purpose for saying X, and he will tell you that. We came to disagree regularly, and I always got out-argued."

That Mr. Foster — who has created a political controversy with charges that Bush administration officials threatened to fire him if he shared data with Congress on the costs of new Medicare legislation — differed in opinion with his bosses is not surprising, said some who know him.

That the unassuming numbers cruncher would be caught in a public firestorm over those disagreements, most conceded, is shocking.

"He's uncomfortable in positions that involve a lot of public appearance and interaction," said Robert M. Ball, former commissioner of the Social Security Administration, where Mr. Foster worked before becoming chief Medicare actuary. "He's a workman, comfortable in back rooms, who likes to be left alone to do his work. For him to come out like this, he must have felt very strongly that the numbers used were completely wrong."

Mr. Foster, 55, said in an interview on Saturday that he had done numerous estimates showing that the cost of a Medicare drug benefit through 2013 would be \$500 billion to \$600 billion. The estimate given to Congress by administration officials was for not more than \$400 billion. Congress passed the benefit in November; in January, the White House announced the measure would cost \$534 billion.

Former colleagues describe Mr. Foster as serious, straightforward, self-assured, but not self-promoting, the kind of guy who purposely deflects attention from himself. A commendation of Mr. Foster by the Department of Health and Human Services, which gave him a Distinguished Executive Award in 2001,

recognized him for "his dynamic leadership and exceptional technical expertise in what has been described as 'the toughest actuary job in the country.' "

Mr. Ball quipped, "I don't know that I'd call him exactly dynamic."

Another former colleague, Robert J. Myers, a former chief actuary at the Social Security Administration who has known Mr. Myers for decades, said, "You could say he's outgoing, for an actuary, anyhow."

Mr. Foster, who spends his days studying complex areas like mortality and disability rates and who races cars and plays guitar in a Medicare agency band in his spare time, is not gregarious, but he is famed among colleagues for his deadpan wit. At an office birthday celebration, co-workers said, he can be counted on to produce a statistical chart detailing the person's advancing years. He makes wry jokes about the actuary's table in the cafeteria of the Baltimore-based agency.

"At a retirement dinner, if 10 people got up to speak, it was Rick everyone would wait to hear," said Mr. Vladeck. "His comments would always be subtle, droll and completely hilarious."

But Mr. Vladeck and other former colleagues said Mr. Foster was unfailingly serious about the need for autonomy in his work. He believes strongly in the right of actuaries to report their findings directly to members of Congress, without clearance from agency officials.

Mr. Myers said that in recent conversations, Mr. Foster seemed agitated about what he considered an ethical quandary. "He was worried," said Mr. Myers, who is now retired, and who would not offer specifics of his talks with Mr. Foster. "Worried that he might have to resign. He said his superiors were putting him into an impossible situation."

Said Mr. Ball: "It's extremely important that everyone trusts the actuaries, that they believe in their ability to call the shots on costs as they see them. Things would be chaotic if Congress decided they couldn't trust the estimates they were getting."

Even though Mr. Foster has made public his accusations, those who know him said he will most likely try to deal with the matter as far from public view as possible. Still, friends said, it is unlikely that he will back down.

"He's not the type to look for trouble," Mr. Myers said. "But on the other hand, if something like this comes right at him, he's not going to avoid dealing with it."