

KUCINICH 2008

Universal Health Care

"Health care is an essential safeguard of human life and dignity and there is an obligation for society to ensure that every person be able to realize this right." -- Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Chicago Archdiocese

Our health care system is broken, and H.R. 676, the Conyers-Kucinich bill, is the only comprehensive solution to the problem. It is also the system endorsed by more than 14,000 physicians from Physicians for a National Health Program. Nearly 46 million Americans have no health care and over 40 million more have only minimal coverage. In 2005 some 41% of moderate and middle income Americans went without health care for part of the year. Even more shocking is that 53% of those earning less than \$20,000 went without insurance for all of 2005. In fact, the National Academy of Science's Institute of Medicine estimates that 18,000 Americans die each year because they have no health insurance.

The American health system is quite sick. Pulitzer Prize journalists Donald Barlett and James Steele, in their stunning analysis of the health care industry, *Critical Condition* (2006 Broadway Books), insist that "... U.S. health care is second-rate at the start of the twenty-first century and destined to get a lot worse and much more expensive." Considering the following facts from Tom Daschle's article for the Center for American Progress: "Paying More but Getting Less: Myths and the Global Case for U.S. Health Reform":

Americans Are the Healthiest People in the World.

FACT: Citizens of 34 nations live longer than Americans.

The U.S. Is the Best Place to Get Sick.

FACT: The World Health Organization ranked the U.S. 37th in the world for health system performance. Countries like Australia and the United Kingdom rank above the U.S. Americans have lower odds of surviving colorectal cancer and childhood leukemia than Canadians who do have national health care. Americans also experience

greater problems in coordination of care than the previously mentioned countries and New Zealand.

Covering All Americans Will Lead to Rationing.

FACT: Same-day access to primary-care physicians in the U.S. (33%) is far less available than in the United Kingdom (41%), Australia (54%) and New Zealand (60%). Per capita spending for health care averaged \$2,696 in countries without waiting lists and \$5,267 in the U.S.

Global Competitiveness Is Hampered in Comprehensive System.

FACT: "Health care costs are not just a burden and barrier to care for individuals; they are taking a heavy toll on American businesses." The strain on employers in 2005 was staggering. "The average total premiums for an employer-based family plan was \$9,979 in 2005 ..." Most of our competitors in the world markets finance their systems outside corporate taxes and employer mandates. Without Medicare for Everyone, the U.S. will continue to hemorrhage jobs.

We Cannot Afford to Cover All Americans.

FACT: We already spend enough to have universal health care. "The truth is, we cannot afford to not reform the health system." We spend about 50% more than the next most expensive nation and nearly twice per person what the Canadians do. On May 1, 2006 Paul Krugman explained in *Death by Insurance* how incredibly wasteful the current system is. The doctor he referenced has two full-time staff members for billing, and two secretaries spend half their time collecting insurance information on the 301 different private plans they deal with. This type of waste is easily 20%. Also consider that 98% of Medicare funds are spent on medical care.

IMPORTANT: The hackneyed -- and inaccurate -- mantra of Republicans when universal health care is introduced is to blame trial lawyers and malpractice cases for our lack of national health care. In fact, 0.46% of our total health spending is spent on awards, legal costs, and underwriting costs -- about the same as Canada and the United Kingdom and about the same amount we spend on dog and cat food each year. While "defensive medicine" may drive up the price, it hardly accounts for our stunning health care costs. The belief that citizens should give up their right to fair legal redress for legally proven medical mistakes in exchange for lower health care costs rings as true as the promise that if we must give up our civil rights to be safe from terrorists.

Even those with coverage too often pay exorbitant rates. The current profit-driven system, dominated by private insurance firms and their bureaucracies, has failed.

We must establish streamlined national health insurance, "Enhanced Medicare for Everyone." It would be publicly financed health care, privately delivered, and will put patients and doctors back in control of the system. Coverage will be more complete than private insurance plans; encourage prevention; and include prescription drugs, dental care, mental health care, and alternative and complementary medicine.

Perhaps the clearest and most eloquent explanation of the Conyers-Kucinich National Health Insurance Bill was given on February 4, 2003, in Washington, D.C., by Dr. Marcia Angell in introducing H.R. 676. Backed by over 14,000 doctors, this is the future of American medicine.

"We are here today to introduce a national health insurance program. Such a program is no longer optional; it's necessary.

"Americans have the most expensive health care system in the world. We spend about twice as much per person as other developed nations, and that gap is growing. That's not because we are sicker or more demanding (Canadians, for example, see their doctors more often and spend more time in the hospital). And it's not because we

get better results. By the usual measures of health (life expectancy, infant mortality, immunization rates), we do worse than most other developed countries. Furthermore, we are the only developed nation that does not provide comprehensive health care to all its citizens. Some 42 million Americans are uninsured (nearly 46 million today -- updated figure) -- disproportionately the sick, the poor, and minorities -- and most of the rest of us are underinsured. In sum, our health care system is outrageously expensive, yet inadequate. Why? The only plausible explanation is that there's something about our system -- about the way we finance and deliver health care -- that's enormously inefficient. The failures of the system were partly masked during the economic boom of the 1990's, but now they stand starkly exposed. There is no question that with the deepening recession and rising unemployment, in the words of John Breaux, 'The system is collapsing around us.'

"The underlying problem is that we treat health care like a market commodity instead of a social service. Health care is targeted not to medical need, but to the ability to pay. Markets are good for many things, but they are not a good way to distribute health care. To understand what's happening, let's look at how the health care market works ..."

"Mainstream" writers like Ph. D. economist and columnist for the New York Times Paul Krugman now agree with those doctors and Dennis that "covering everyone under Medicare would actually be significantly cheaper than our current system." They all recognize that we already spend enough to provide national health care to all but lack the political courage to make the tough decisions that doctors, nurses and medical professionals must run our health care system -- not "for profit" insurance companies, who make money by denying health care.

It is time to recognize that all the civilized countries have a solution that we must adapt to this country. American businesses can no longer be competitive shouldering the entire cost of health care. Health care is a right that all Americans deserve.