In Health Care, Some More Equal Than Others

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I recently visited my father's grave at Arlington National Cemetery. He received the Silver Star for risking his own life to protect his men during an ambush in WWII. He received the Purple Heart for the permanent, disabling wounds he received in doing so. Like him, the row upon row of patriots resting there embody our finest values: equality, justice, and sense of duty to our family, friends and larger American community.

Sadly, our health care system fails to live up to these core American ideals. In our present system, some people are apparently more equal than others, more worthy of life and good health. Take just one example: nearly 45,000 people die each year in the United States because they lack health insurance and can't get the timely medical care they need, according to a recent Harvard research study ("Health Insurance and Mortality in U.S. Adults". American Journal of Public Health, Sept. 2009).

Our fragmentary distribution of health care is unfair, even merciless. All other industrialized nations have based their health care systems upon the moral principle that everyone deserves protection from illness and suffering. Our system is based on profit. We have market-driven health care that excludes those who can't pay. People you know. People like you.

Why is supporting health care for all so hard for Americans? We're a moral, generous, caring nation. We don't believe people should suffer or die from lack of money. However, we also believe people should be responsible and self-reliant. Americans hate freeloaders. Our values are in conflict, creating a serious dilemma. We don't want good people to suffer, but we don't want our generosity exploited, leaving us vulnerable to suffering ourselves.

The new Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act will have a profound impact on our health care system. Although perpetuating our deeply flawed and unsustainable system, there are a few useful healthcare reforms that will provide some people temporary relief. Medicaid will be expanded, there will be more money for primary care centers, preventive services will be added to the Medicare benefit and reimbursement for Medicaid patients will increase among other positive changes. Unfortunately, the bill still leaves out 23 million Americans and will not control costs. The legislation will not help our health care system become either universal or affordable because it does not eliminate the root of the problem, the for-profit health insurance companies.

The solution that best integrates our values and resolves this dilemma is single-payer national health care or "Medicare for All." Single payer would be far less costly than our present system, saving about $400 billion annually in wasteful paperwork and bureaucracy. We would have choice of provider with more control over the system through our participatory democracy. And there would be no co-pays or deductibles.

Under an "improved Medicare for All", citizens would not be "medical-loss commodities" but human beings deserving of compassionate care when they get sick. Because funding would be tax-based (with taxes amounting to less than what we pay now in premiums and out-of-pocket expenses), all would contribute their fair share. Few could cheat or avoid shared responsibility.

In this case, the best moral solution is also the best economic solution.

If we are one nation with justice for all, our health care system must be for all. Without access to quality health care, one's right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness is abridged. My father and his Arlington compatriots sacrificed for all, not some, Americans. As long as we have inequality in our health care system, many of us remain less equal than others, not because we're undeserving or irresponsible, but because we simply don't have enough money. That's immoral and un-American.