

Medicare 49th Birthday

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Imagine being very sick but unable to go to the hospital because it costs too much. Then Congress passes a law that suddenly gives you, and others like you, automatic access to high-quality health care. Almost overnight you're able to get the medical attention you need – and at the hospital of your choice.

No, I'm not talking about the Affordable Care Act. I'm talking about what happened to about 19 million seniors on July 30, 1965, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed Medicare, our pre-eminent social health insurance program covering people 65 and older, into law. A terrible burden of worry and financial strain was lifted from the elderly and their families.

In 1965, President Johnson signed Medicare into law saying, "For the first time in the history of America, every senior citizen will be able to receive hospital care – not as a ward of the state, not as a charity case, but as an insured patient." Years ago, I had a patient whose uninsured mother was diagnosed with breast cancer a few months shy of her 65th birthday. Initially, as an uninsured patient, she got adequate care in the overburdened public system. But once she became eligible for Medicare, she was able to transfer to a premier cancer center (because she was in the middle of her cancer treatments) and her care was much, much better - as an insured patient.

The number of such stories is endless. As a result, polls show Americans love their Medicare, despite its flaws. Today many people look forward to their 65th birthday almost as much as they looked forward to their 18th and 21st. Each age bringing a different set of freedoms.

In Texas, Medicare covers over 3 million people, the vast majority of whom are seniors. But the law also covers over a half million younger Texans who have severe disabilities. (As the years passed, Medicare was expanded to cover more people with severe conditions.)

Of those 3 million Texans, 63 percent are white, 23 percent are Hispanic, 10 percent are black and 4 percent are other. Since its enactment, Medicare has become an indispensable lifeline to members of all racial and income groups in our state.

So how did Medicare get passed? Medicare was an "easy sell" to Congress and the American people because it was a health benefit added on to the existing (and very popular) Social Security program. The need for it was certainly acute: Most health insurance companies did not want to offer insurance to the elderly because it was not profitable.

While there was opposition to the bill by the American Medical Association and commercial insurance carriers, who raised alarms about Medicare being an "un-

American” plot to create a “socialized medicine” program, a major groundswell of support from seniors overpowered such scare tactics. Today we are grateful they did so.

Incidentally, it may come as a surprise to many readers that the conservative, autocratic 19th-century chancellor of Germany, Otto von Bismarck, is considered by many to be the father of universal national health insurance. Bismarck not only thought a nation had a moral obligation to provide some protection to its citizenry from misfortune with basic social safety nets such as national health insurance, he was also a savvy politician who appreciated efficiency and who wanted to get ahead of the political curve. Today’s far-sighted politicians would do well to recognize that the so-called free market doesn’t work in health care. Including private corporations invariably drives healthcare costs up.

For 49 years, Medicare has proven its ability to serve millions efficiently, effectively and humanely. It's time to extend Medicare to the entire population and treat health care as a nonprofit, public good, much like we regard public roads, schools, police and fire departments. After all, in the richest nation on earth, don't we all deserve some freedom and protection from worrying about if we are going to get health care or how we're going to pay for it when it's our turn to have the misfortune of getting sick?