



The Right to Health Care



By Dennis A. Chu, MD

CALIFORNIA HAS RECENTLY EXPERIENCED a crisis in the workers' compensation system and in general health care for people at large. Why does our health care system get worse each time it is fixed? One reason is that we have been neglecting the underlying principle of health care: Health care should be treated as a basic right, not a commodity.

As a commodity, people can trade, buy and sell health care for profit. There can be mark-ups, middle men, and infrastructures to produce profits and to increase bottom line. Because the main goal of the present health care system is profit, health care can be traded on New York Stock Exchange, NASDAQ and electronic boards. Health care companies and their officers will do their best to increase profit. If they can employ delaying tactics, use contracted management companies to deny the services, or cut the providers' fee, they will. Their priority is the bottom line, not making sure every person in their health care system gets appropriate services; these two goals conflict with each other.

The result of this broken system is a complicated, costly, confused health care system. Many patients are underserved, under-covered or have no health coverage at all.

It is easy to hope patients who were denied medical services will accept their fates or disappear, so society as a whole will save money. No, they will not. These unfortunate patients show up in Emergency Rooms, which are more expensive than regular care and preventive services. Or these patients wait until their diseases progress into the late stage when medical care will undeniably be more costly and unsatisfactory.

It is not morally acceptable to abandon so many of our people who are sick and in need of medical care, as we do now. The priority of a health care system should be coverage for all, in proportion to society's resources, regardless of their employment, health status, or financial situation. Critics will promptly cry out that the United States as a whole, and California as a state, do not have resources to cover all health care services. This is a false argument. It is difficult to understand why the richest nation in the world cannot provide health care for its citizens when other countries can. A US citizen will tremble and be fearful for his financial future when sick. Not a Canadian; not a European.

Others will point out that if the United States covers health care for all citizens, people will have to wait a long time for MRIs, CAT scans, and various medical or surgical procedures. So be it. We do not have unlimited resources to satisfy all needs; but we should cover the medical services our nation's resources allow. If people have to wait for certain procedures or certain treatments, they will wait, knowing that they are treated equally and fairly.

The principle of health care is this: Health care should be treated as a right instead of a commodity. As a right, when we are sick, we are treated, no questions asked. When people call for the Fire Department or for the Police, they are not asked, "What is your coverage?"

When society treats health care as a basic right, the health care system can focus on treating patients and preventing illness from becoming worse, and more costly, to society. The irony is that the cost of preventive services is very low compared to treatment of late stage disease. Even when the priority and principle are aligned, one cannot guarantee all the problems will go away overnight; however most of the difficulties in obtaining medical care, and in accessing it, will be substantially reduced.

dachu@surewest.net

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

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