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American, cure thyself

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THE DEBATE about reforming health care has gotten about as appealing as watching a maggot crawl out of an open, untended wound.

If that image nauseates then so should the spectacle of various special interests and their political lackeys, and various ideologues with favorite whipping boys, trying to goad mere potential patients into a pro/con frenzy. If our health care is sick, sick, sick then it is because our political process is diseased, diseased, diseased.

The debate remains critically important, of course, but it sure has gotten ugly.

Ugliest of all is that, mired in the details and hung up on the overarching philosophical preferences, most participants seem to have forgotten what this is all about. It's about people. Hurting people, dying people, people who need care and attention to keep breathing a few years longer.

It's not about who makes money off of health care. It's not even about who pays for it, although it seems as though everybody wants cradle-to-the-grave medical attention for anything that happens to them, even if their own fault, without ever seeing a bill.

Losing sight of the actual problem, and of the human factor, is causing debaters on both sides to completely lose sight of what this is about. Even any "facts and figures," presented by either side, are instantly attacked, pooh-poohed, branded propaganda to the point most citizens, who actually have the most at stake, no longer know who or what to believe.

IN A PROBABLY vain attempt to blow away some of the fog, here's some data that may help. It comes from the World Health Organization and is selected because it happens to be about what the current proposals in the United States should be about, and probably aren't: patient outcomes. In other words, was the patient repaired, still alive after the medical assistance, or did he/she even get the treatment needed.

The WHO is, of course, an arm of the dreaded supposed one-worlders of the United Nations although all it seems to have cared about since formed in 1948 is improving health care and it is largely run by medical professionals.

Well, this is one world although it doesn't have to be governed in that way and the most recent campaign of WHO is to encourage breastfeeding. How terrifying!

Certainly its data can be criticized because it comes from governments, none of which have strong accuracy records regarding statistics. Certainly, at the Cato Institute critics of the data point out that there is a margin of error ... but then, all the election polls they chose as to their liking have similar margins of error. Anything human is fallible, which also explains why medical personnel will, from time to time, do a patient more harm than good.

Still, the WHO data destroys the notion that the United States has “the best health care in the world.” That’s actually true, by the way, if the always forgotten trailing clause is left out: It has the best health care in the world “for those who can afford to pay for everything it has to offer.”

In reality, based on WHO data on worldwide results for entire populations, the U.S. ranks 37th ... right behind Portugal and Colombia. It is 44th in infant mortality. Life expectancy of its citizens is 21st, trailing the countries with nationalized health care including such as Canada, France, Japan. (Move to Japan as a child and their doctors will keep you alive for 4.6 years longer.) The U.S. also has fewer doctors, nurses, hospital beds per population than most of the roughly 30 other countries considered to be about equally advanced.

THAT’S WHAT the hot topic ought to be and everything else pales in comparison.

As for what this sort of dubious “best” costs, even though it isn’t assured to be available because so many Americans either have no insurance or too little, that is No. 1 most expensive in the world ... by a mile. Health-care system costs are 17 percent of the U.S. gross national product. The next nearest country comes in at 11 percent and the average is 9 percent.

By the way, about 55 percent of all personal bankruptcies in the U.S. are now attributed to medical bills.

As of data from 2007, the per capita cost of paying for this health care system, including by those maybe 50 million without any insurance coverage, and meaning for every man, woman and child in the land, came to \$6,001 a year.

In places with far better patient outcomes, the matching figure was \$2,139 in Japan, \$2,232 in Great Britain, \$2,520 in Sweden, \$2,903 in France and in Canada, the currently popular “whipping boy” of “socialized medicine” in this country, it was \$3,001.

LET’S BE CLEAR: The current health-care reform proposals in Congress are awful.

Not only because they would still leave some Americans without sure and certain health protection but because they seem structured to largely keep intact, with “new taxes” no less, a failed and flawed health-care edifice that is broken. Whether it is the result of gouging, inefficiency or whatever it seems Americans are paying two or three times as much for health care with lesser outcomes than all — ALL — those nations somewhat equally wealthy and advanced on the globe.

That’s what’s wrong. People are dying or hurting that don’t need to be. Everybody, even those who can afford treatment, pay too much for less certain outcomes than can be expected in too many places that a lot of Americans seem inclined to view as “lesser.”

Until the focus of this debate is returned to the actual topic no positive result can occur. Whatever does come of it seems destined at this moment to miss both the point and the problem.

The only reason for reforming the current system is to improve the outcome. The argument has to be about helping all of our people become healthier, hurt less, live longer and not about either our money or political philosophies.

LET'S GET BACK on the correct topic. If we keep our eyes on the necessary goal, the mere details will take care of themselves.

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