

Letter: Whatever we're having, it's not "a rousing debate about healthcare"

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If you believed television commentators and print pundits, you would think that Republican efforts to repeal Obamacare (The Affordable Care Act) have produced a rousing debate between Americans about the best way to reform American healthcare. Don't believe them. We are having a debate, and it kind of involves healthcare, but the debate is not about the best way to reform healthcare and, for the most part, it isn't the American people doing the debating.

If the debate really was about the best way to reform healthcare, it would encompass everything we currently know about healthcare around the world, and everything we know about healthcare in the United States. That debate would include the fact that the Government Accounting Office issued a report to the House of Representatives in 1991 that explicitly concluded that "If the universal coverage and single-payer features of the Canadian system were applied in the United States, the savings in administrative costs alone would be more than enough to finance insurance coverage for the millions of Americans who are currently uninsured. There would be enough left over to permit a reduction, or possibly even the elimination, of co-payments and deductibles, if that were deemed appropriate." The report is titled "Canadian Health Insurance, Lessons for the United States."

Have you heard anyone on TV mention that report? Seen it discussed in the press? I have not.

A true debate would also include the undeniable fact that the rest of the industrial world provides universal healthcare to its citizens, and does not rely on "the free market" to do it. Some countries achieve universal care through a single payer system; others achieve it through private insurance that the government tightly regulates to ensure that everybody gets covered for most types of care, and that everybody can afford that coverage.

That seems to me to be a crucial piece of evidence for anyone truly debating the best way to reform American healthcare. How often have you seen that fact discussed on TV? How often have you read about that in the media?

What I have seen on TV is Michael Tanner of the Cato Institute (on C-SPAN) misrepresenting how the Swiss healthcare system works, to make it seem like it relies solely on the free market. It does not.

What I have read in the media is a lengthy op-ed by Chen and Weinberg in the New York Times that devotes considerable effort to debunking claims about (1) Bernie Sanders' Medicare for All, and (2) the quality of American healthcare compared to other countries. The problem is that no one ever made the claims they debunk. The op-ed, titled "The Sanders Single-Payer Plan Is No Miracle Cure," is in the paper's Sept. 19 edition.

And the debate is not among American citizens, it is a debate among the Republicans who control Congress. The very politicians funded largely by the business interests that benefit from what they constantly pitch as a "free market" system. That's how you end up with the great majority of Republicans in Congress supporting healthcare bill after healthcare bill that almost all Americans oppose. That's how you end up with Republican Senator John Kennedy afraid that if states are given healthcare block grants, some state might implement a single payer system.

Until America can find a way to have an actual debate that honestly looks at the real world evidence about healthcare systems, we will remain the prisoners of drug companies, medical insurance companies, and other big business interests. And we will remain an unhealthy laughingstock in the eyes of the rest of the world.