



I'm not dying to see those Democratic health-care plans enacted

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October 20, 2019

There is a character in Joseph Heller's World War II novel "Catch-22" who is obsessed with immortality. His goal, he says, is "to live forever or die trying."

I hope that guy lived long enough to watch the big Democratic presidential primary debate on health care last week.

The promises put forward stopped just short of eternal life. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders led the pack:

"Under the Medicare-for-all bill that I wrote, premiums are gone," Sanders said. "Co-payments are gone. Deductibles are gone. All out-of-pocket expenses are gone."

Sanders would fund this – and a lot more – through tax hikes on the wealthy. Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts also backed an ambitious Medicare-for-all plan. But when a moderator asked her "Will you raise taxes on the middle class to pay for it, yes or no?" Warren declined to answer.

Why should she? When it comes to health care, Americans across the political spectrum want something for nothing.

I see evidence of that almost daily. Last week I saw [an op-ed in The Hill](#) from a self-proclaimed free-market think tank that was critical of Canada's socialized system of health care - not because it promises too much free stuff, but because it promises too little.

The author told the sad story of a 41-year-old man suffering from ALS who took his own life, purportedly because the government health plan would offer him only 20 hours per day of in-home health care. If he wanted 24-hour care, he'd have to pay for the remainder himself.

That's a sad tale. But to put it in perspective, in a true free-market system the patient would be responsible for the entire cost. In America, many such patients fall back on our single-payer programs, Medicaid and Medicare.

Then there's that fight over whether Medicare should bargain with the pharmaceutical companies over the price of prescription drugs. Of course it should, [at least from a free-market perspective](#).

When you go to buy a car, you don't just accept any price the dealer offers. You shop around for the best price.

Yet there are a number of self-proclaimed “free market” pressure groups arguing that Medicare should pay whatever Big Pharma asks. That’s like saying you should pay \$60,000 for a Honda Civic if the dealer asks you to.

The idea that this is a free-market argument is hogwash, said Michael Tanner of the Cato Institute, a true free-market think tank based in Washington.

“Why can’t we bargain for prescription drugs?” Tanner asks.

He answers his own question, from a solidly free-market perspective:

“Because in order to bargain for prescription drugs, you have to be willing to say no,” Tanner said.

Democratic leaders, as well as President Trump, have discussed having Medicare bargain on prices. But the opponents employ scare tactics implying that people will be denied their medication.

Such scare tactics often work. Few politicians, either Democratic or Republican, want to say no. But the reality is that there has to be some limit on health care, Tanner said.

“The idea that there’s a health care system that provides unlimited care for free: It just doesn’t exist,” he said. “Every health-care system in the world rations care through some mechanism.”

Countries like Canada and England do so through waiting lists. The United States does it through pricing – at least until you reach 65. Then you’re eligible for that single-payer system known as Medicare.

The problem with expanding Medicare to those under 65, said Tanner, is simple math. Currently, a two-earner couple may have paid about \$150,000 in payroll taxes to fund Medicare. But they’re likely to consume about \$450,000 in benefits, he said.

The government makes up the missing \$300,000. In theory, it could pick up the subsidy for those under 65 as well. But the federal government is already running annual trillion-dollar deficits.

And even if you had that kind of money, would you want to spend it on a program that gives Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos free medical care? Few Democrats would.

“The thing about Obamacare was that it’s progressive,” said Tanner, who personally advocates free-market options such as health savings accounts, as do I.

Under Obamacare, the more you make, the more you pay for health care.

The Republicans have already repealed the individual mandate, the most onerous aspect of Obamacare. A lot of people predicted that Obamacare exchanges would collapse without the mandate. That hasn’t happened, said Tanner.

“We have definitely not seen it about a year and a half in from the effective date of repeal,” he said.

Without the mandate, Obamacare is a lot more attractive to Republicans than anything those 12 Democrats were proposing.

It may not live forever. But don’t expect to see it die anytime soon.