

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

How ACA fuels corporatization of American health care

By Dr. Philip Caper
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A [new Harvard study](#) has found that Americans' trust in the medical profession has dropped dramatically in recent years and lags behind that in many other wealthy countries. At the same time, doctors are becoming [increasingly unhappy](#) with our profession. In his new memoir, "[Doctored](#)," Dr. Sandeep Jauhar eloquently explains why: More and more doctors are coming to view our profession as just another job.

We now have a situation where patients are losing confidence in their doctors, while doctors are losing confidence in our ability to do the right thing for our patients. We have a health care system becoming more hostile to doctors and patients and more friendly to health care corporations.

These trends are collateral damage caused by another trend: our increasingly corporatized, commodified and commercialized U.S. health care "industry" that is being put into hyper drive by the Affordable Care Act. The ACA is accelerating an ongoing wave of hospital consolidations and acquisition of doctors' practices by large corporations, such as Eastern Maine Healthcare Systems and MaineHealth.

As we continue down this road, doctors see our [clinical autonomy disappearing](#) as more and more of us become corporate employees subject to pressure to meet corporate financial goals that often differ from what is best for our patients. Patients sense that pressure as they are rushed through exams and are subject to [more tests and procedures](#), some of them of questionable clinical value. They can almost hear the cash registers ringing as they move through their doctors' offices, as more wealth is transferred from patients to those selling health care goods and services.

Why is American medicine, once the crown jewel of American professionalism and a proud and respected calling, becoming just another [commercial enterprise](#)? In his 2010 book "[Hijacked](#)," Dr. John Geyman, chairman emeritus of the department of family practice at the University of Washington, explains how during the year-long Congressional debate leading up to enactment of the ACA, the interests of the public, including doctors and patients, were subverted to those of large health care corporations.

The highjacking of health care reform is paying off handsomely. Robert Pear of the New York Times recently [described](#) how the federal government and the commercial health insurance industry have morphed into one big fan club for the ACA. He quotes the libertarian Cato

Institute's Michael Cannon explaining that since the ACA's enactment, "Insurers and the government have developed a symbiotic relationship, nurtured by tens of billions of dollars that flow from the federal Treasury to insurers each year."

Pear goes on to report that, "Since Mr. Obama signed the law, share prices for four of the major insurance companies — Aetna, Cigna, [Humana](#) and UnitedHealth — have more than doubled, while the Standard & Poor's 500-stock index has increased about 70 percent."

Pharmaceutical companies also have done very well. The ACA contains no authority for the government to negotiate pharmaceutical prices but continues the federal prohibition on the importation by U.S. residents of lower priced prescription drugs from many foreign countries.

This situation won't change anytime soon. Congress is gridlocked. What is widely recognized as a drafting error in the ACA — which, in saner times, could have been fixed quickly without attracting much attention — is now [headed to the Supreme Court](#).

Of course, health care is just one of many examples in which the welfare of corporations has been put ahead of the interests of the public, but it may be the poster child. Health care is now more than a sixth of our economy, and human lives and dollars are at stake.

Corporate stranglehold of our public policy traces back to the increasingly corrupt way our political campaigns are financed. The recent midterm elections were a stark reminder of that, setting record levels for corporate spending, even on local races, and saturating voters with negative, intrusive and often obnoxious messages.

What's at stake is the future of health care and many other issues that will determine what kind of a country our children will live in. That future depends on how active and informed the public is willing to become in electing public officials who place the welfare of their constituents ahead of the wishes of their corporate contributors.

The results of the recent elections are not encouraging. But what's becoming clearer is that our struggle is not between Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, or occupiers and tea partiers. It is between real American people and corporations.

I, for one, intend to continue pointing that out. That's where our attention should be focused.