

## **Broken system: The U.S. has failed at health care**

By Dr. Han S. Park

In the presidential election debates these days, the topic of health care looms prominently. Before rushing to form an opinion on this controversial issue, though, one should be presented with a vital fact: Americans are not enjoying health care commensurate with their nation's advanced post-industrial status.

According to the World Health Organization, the United States ranks at the very bottom of all advanced democracies, including the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, Japan, Italy, Germany, France, Canada and Austria. In fact, the United States ranks only 37th among all countries in the world, far behind all the other industrialized democracies.

Life expectancy, infant mortality, and the number of hospital beds per 1,000 people are among the critical indicators generally considered to be the common barometers of health conditions. On these indicators, the United States ranks at the very bottom among the industrialized democracies.

Furthermore, the number of people without health insurance is more than 46 million, representing some 15 percent of the total population. This figure is embarrassing compared with France, where only 330,000 people, or 0.4 percent of the population, are uninsured.

The drastically inferior health status of Americans is not necessarily due to a lack of health care spending or a shortage of physicians. In fact, government spending on health as a percentage of total government expenditures is 19 percent, the highest of all the aforementioned countries. The actual dollar amount spent on health per person is also relatively high at \$2,725 - higher than all but Sweden and Norway. The number of physicians per 1,000 people also is ranked favorably in comparison with the U.K., Japan, Canada and Austria.

Yet, even considering the positive statistics, it seems clear the health-care system in the United States is a mismanaged failure, desperately in need of an overhaul.

A common thread across most advanced democracies is that the government is actively and extensively involved in the health care system. These countries have shown that political democracy is not incompatible with people's willingness to allow the government to function as the manager of public health. We in the United States are suffering from the outdated myth that the state should abstain from involvement in the health care of its citizens in order to avoid "socialized" health care. Due to the long-held stigma that socialism is undemocratic and un-American, any mention of universal health care by the state routinely is vilified and dismissed.

The consensus in the current presidential debates for both parties seldom has deviated from this sort of stigma. Americans must wake up to the realization that putting health

care in the domain of the government can indeed coexist with political democracy. Few will say the advanced European countries and Canada where such is the case are undemocratic simply because they have expanded the roles and duties of their governments to include the health care of their citizens.

As much as socialized medicine is tabooed, the reality is that we already have an extensive intervention of the state in private life through a number of programs such as Social Security, anti-trust law, the minimum wage, unemployment compensation and a host of other welfare programs. These government-sponsored programs largely have been effective and well-received by the public. In fact, there are domains in a political system that cannot be and have not been effectively privatized: the military, police forces, fire stations and agencies of disease control, to name some. When these public services are inadequate, we blame the government and hold it accountable.

Presently in the United States, no one is accountable for the failure in public health - neither the government nor the insurance industry. In the name of privatization, the government avoids the domain of public health; for profit, insurance companies explore every means possible to avoid liability for public health, leaving the patients helpless in the process. People without insurance or with insufficient coverage tend to remove themselves from health and medical care services until their health problems reach a critical point, which often requires much greater medical expense.

The totally inadequate current health care system must be reformed without being restricted by any perceived stigmas, and only for the eventual aim of providing citizens with the best health care possible. In the end, what matters is enabling people to live longer, healthier and more dignified lives.

The United States has a long-established reputation as the champion for human rights, and health as a condition of life is necessarily a matter of human rights. Of these human rights, nothing is more essential and immediate than the right to life (survival) - even more pressing than the rights to political freedom and civil liberty. Human rights are universal and inalienable, and every person is entitled to them.

The notion of entitlement implies a shared responsibility to protect that to which we are entitled. We cannot dismiss starving children in remote corners of the world as "none of our business." Because these children are entitled to life, the rest of us are obligated to see their hunger alleviated. In this sense, health is a matter of collective or public responsibility. Just like security and safety, the health of the people is and should be a matter of public responsibility.

Government in a democratic system is a public agent charged by the people to create, protect and manage public goods and services. If we charge the government with the responsibility of protecting people's lives from external hostility, we should not be deterred from charging it with the role and duty to take care of the people's health.

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