

“DEATH PANELS” AND FOUR OTHER HEALTH CARE MYTHS: YET ANOTHER MAJOR TRAGEDY IN “FACT-FREE” AMERICA

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Whenever people are well informed, they can be trusted with their own government.

—Thomas Jefferson

The American health care system is an indefensible morass of waste and cruelty.

—Jonathan Chait, *The New Republic* (October 7, 2009)

Myth #1. The Affordable Care Act is a government takeover. The people at Pulitzer Prize winning Politifact, who have criticized both Democrats and Republicans for their errors, have declared this claim “2010 Lie of the Year.” FactCheck.org, also an independent fact-checking group, calls “government takeover” the “whopper” of the health care debate. Sen. Mitch McConnell continues GOP distortions by repeatedly saying that President Obama has nationalized health care, the banks, insurance, and the car industry. The last three will of course be back in private hands soon.

Politifact quotes Jonathan Oberlander, professor of health policy at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill: “The label ‘government takeover’ has no basis in reality, but instead reflects a political dynamic where conservatives label any increase in government authority in health care as a ‘takeover.’”

Compared to government-run Medicare and Medicaid (the largest system of socialized medicine in the world), HR 3590 would actually expand private insurance among Americans. A great majority will still receive coverage from private companies through their employers. Republicans love tax credits, and that it is precisely what the bill gives to people who cannot afford unnecessarily high premiums.

Maggie Mahar, author of *Money-Driven Medicine: The Real Reason Health Care Costs So Much*, states: “Doctors will not be working for the government. Hospitals will not be owned by the government.” The government would increase regulation in some areas, but a great majority of Americans support these measures. Three out of four of those polled by Bloomberg Business News want Uncle Sam to force insurers to cover pre-existing conditions, and two in three say that they must allow young people to stay on their parents’ policy longer.

Forty-seven percent of these same people, however, said that HR 3590 should be repealed, proving that most Americans do not know the specifics of the bill. Over 50 percent of people in an Associated Press poll thought that the bill would raise their taxes, but as the AP writer quips: “That would be true only if most people were devoted to indoor tanning, which got hit with a sales tax.”

Being uninformed has now reached new lows: only 10 percent of those polled by New York Times/CBS knew that Obama had given them a tax cut as part of the stimulus bill. The new tax bill also includes a substantial payroll tax cut. In America it seems that only the GOP gets credit for tax relief.

Myth #2. President Obama would set up “death panels.” Although an Associated Press poll found that 25 percent believe it, this was Politifact’s “2009 Lie of the Year.” The source of this whopper was Sarah Palin, who warned that “my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama’s death panel so his bureaucrats can decide whether they are worthy of health care.”

Politifact’s Truth-O-Meter went way over to “Pants on Fire” for this one. Here is their correction: “The truth is that the health bill allows Medicare, for the first time, to pay for doctor appointments for patients to discuss living wills and other end-of-life issues. These types of appointments are optional, and AARP supports the measure.”

HR 3590 would also set up a Comparative Effectiveness Research Center, which “looks at outcomes, effectiveness, and appropriateness of health care services and procedures in order to identify the manner in which diseases, disorders, and other health conditions can most effectively and appropriately be prevented, diagnosed, treated, and managed clinically.” This information would be available to doctors and no treatments would be forced on any patients.

Myth #3. Compulsory health care is un-American. Americans accept all sorts of laws that force compliance for a number of good reasons. All states demand that cars have liability insurance, most states require motorcyclists to wear helmets, and they fine people who do not wear seatbelts. This is a lot better than emergency room care for these fools or scrapping up their remains off our highways.

The argument for mandatory health insurance is based on the principle of shared risk: the more people who are covered the less cost. If American health insurance companies can no longer cherry-pick their customers, this is the only way that they can still stay in business and hopefully reduce their premiums.

This is the principal reason why universal coverage in most industrialized countries—all with mandatory coverage and many with private insurers that may not take a profit—costs less than half of what Americans pay. Furthermore, there are still 50 million, incredibly enough especially for Europeans to believe, with no coverage at all.

Myth #4: The U.S. has the best health care in the world. This is true only if one picks, as many conservatives have done, the few statistics that look good. In addition to being tops in detecting and curing cancer, the U.S. also does very well treating diabetes and hypertension. A large percentage of American women have had pap smears and mammograms in the past two years.

But more than twice as many Americans die of asthma than other people in the industrialized world, where the U.S. ranked 20th out of 25 nations. Most experts believe that the best criterion to use to rate health care performance is preventable deaths for those under 75, and here the U.S. placed last among 19 nations (*Reuters*, 1/8/08). France, Australia, and Japan were at the top of the list.

A 2009 comprehensive comparative study done by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that “American doctors were less likely to agree that their health care system works well and more likely to consider that the system needs complete rebuilding. Half of American hospital executives said they were not satisfied with the performance of their country’s health care system, compared with between 4 and 12 percent of hospital executives in four other countries.”

Most industrialized countries control medical costs have insisting on a national fee structure for every procedure. Since 1980 Germany’s health care costs have tripled while the America’s have sextupled. Even though many new drugs are developed in the U.S., Americans still spend 35-55 percent more for their pills.

While U.S. costs are out of control at \$7,290 per person, the next closest country is Switzerland at \$4,417, Canada at \$3,895, France at \$3,601, and Sweden at \$3,323. In many countries doctors still do house calls, and the Netherlands is saving lots of money—by diverting patients from expensive emergency rooms—by providing 24/7 care in clinics throughout the country. (All the Dutch are covered by private insurers, but they may not take a profit.) Even with one of the highest number of doctor visits per capita, Japan still spends only \$2,581 per person.

In March 2009 America’s Business Roundtable issued a report that demonstrated that, on a 100 point medical “values” scale, the U.S. is 23 points behind Canada, Japan, Germany, the UK, and France. H. Edward Hanway, CEO of Cigna Insurance, states: “What’s important is that we measure and compare actual value—not just how much we spend on health care, but the performance we get back in return” (Associated Press, 3-12-09). Hanway and his colleagues warn that without major health care reform the U.S. will continue to lose economic competitiveness.

Myth #5. The GOP has a better plan. Jonathan Chait sums up the stark difference between the two parties: “Democrats propose to shift resources from the rich and the healthy to the poor and the sick. Republicans want to do just the opposite.” (*The New Republic* 3-25-10) Chait quotes the Congressional Budget Office’s conclusion: “The GOP plan would reduce premiums for healthy people, bringing more of them into the insurance pool, and raise premiums for sicker people, driving them out.”

Republicans favor medical savings accounts, and they point to Singapore as a successful experiment. The only problem is that the program failed. In 1993 the government had to set up Medifund, which now pays \$218 million dollars a year to subsidize health care for the poor and indigent. Calculating for population, this is comparable to Medicaid budgets more than three times higher than the state and the federal governments now have.

While always praising Hong Kong’s free market economy, Milton Friedman neglected to mention the fact that 85 percent of its citizens receive their medical care from a system based on the British National Health Service. It is amazingly efficient in that it takes only 3 percent of the city state’s GDP compared to the U.S.’s 16 percent. The 15 percent who pay for private services add, incredibly enough, another 3 percent of GDP for their medical costs.

Extending Medicare to every American just got support from two reputable organizations. After surveying hundreds of thousands of people, the Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems found that 70 percent of Medicare patients report that they always get access to the services they need, while only 51 percent said that they always received proper care from private companies. A Commonwealth Fund study concluded that “compared with the [private] employer-coverage group, people in the Medicare group report fewer problems obtaining medical care, less financial hardship due to medical bills, and higher overall satisfaction with their coverage.”

Politifact traced the origin of the GOP’s “government takeover” campaign to pollster and Fox News commentator Frank Luntz. In his famous 2009 memo on health care strategy, Luntz recommended that "the arguments against the Democrats' healthcare plan must center around politicians, bureaucrats and Washington not the free market, tax incentives or competition." While the Democrats tried to explain the details of a very complex bill, the Republicans chose to scare the public with threats of a government takeover. Fear usually works best with those who are chronically misinformed.

For two years running Luntz and Palin have been the sources of the best press lies in the country. As we discovered from the 2008 presidential campaign, Palin resists instruction from GOP advisers, one of whom realized that she did not know why the two Koreas were divided. She would rather just let thoughts drop directly to her tongue without the intervention of normal cognitive processes.

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