

‘Occupy’ and U.S. Health Care

By **Mary O’Brien, M.D.** *CommonDreams, Jan. 10, 2012*

After wincing a bit from the free flu shot, my young patient turned to me and said, “What you’re doing here is awesome – it’s so hard get health care!”

“Here” happened to be New York City’s Zuccotti Park in mid-November, the epicenter of Occupy Wall Street, just days before the encampment was broken up by hundreds of Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s armor-clad police in the dead of night. But it could have been anywhere in the United States.

Health care is in fact increasingly unaffordable for the 99 percent. More than 50 million Americans lack health insurance and thus reasonable access to treatment. A recent Harvard study showed about 45,000 excess deaths annually can be linked to lack of insurance.

Even people with insurance face formidable barriers to care like rising co-pays and deductibles. As a result, they are putting off care, getting sicker and ending up in our emergency rooms with serious complications – often facing crushing medical bills later.

This increased “cost sharing” by patients helps explain this week’s report by U.S. Health and Human Services showing the use of medical services has slowed. People can’t afford it.

But lack of care invites serious illness or worse. That’s part of the reason why I and scores of other doctors, nurses, medical students and social workers came down to Zuccotti Park and volunteered our time to give out free flu shots.

But I confess that my desire to help went beyond the Samaritan impulse of preventing illness and aiding the sick, an impulse that, remarkably, still persists among our nation’s health professionals despite the toxic atmosphere of our for-profit health system.

I and many others were impelled to take action because the Occupy movement struck a chord with us. We’re angry that our health economy – like the overall economy – has more than sufficient resources to take care of all of us, but the resources are siphoned off by profit-driven corporations in the interest of “the 1 percent.”

Working on the front lines of health care, we see that economic and social inequalities in our present system make our patients sick. The lack of jobs and decent wages, affordable housing, healthy food and quality education takes a heavy toll on the mind and body, and each workday we see the casualties mounting.

We also recognize that the private health insurance industry and Big Pharma exemplify one of the Occupy movement's central themes: that unchecked corporate greed tramples human needs. Need I recite the billions in profits these companies make each year, or the outlandish salaries of their CEOs, based on skyrocketing premiums and denials of care?

The private insurers, with all the bureaucracy and paperwork they inflict on us, add enormous costs to the delivery of health care, but add no value. Yet, unfortunately, they remain at the very center of our health system under the federal reform law.

There is a clear solution to our health care crisis. Put patients ahead of corporate greed and establish a nonprofit single-payer health care system – an expanded and improved Medicare for all – with no co-pays or deductibles.

A single-payer system would provide high-quality, comprehensive care for everyone – without exception – for no more money than our nation is paying now. We'd save about \$400 billion annually due to lower administrative costs. Such a system would also give us tools to rein in costs, like the ability to negotiate lower pharmaceutical prices.

While helping out at Zuccotti Park, I was gratified to hear others chant a slogan I and millions of other Americans have long embraced: Health care is a human right. We will not stop fighting until that principle is enshrined in law and delivered in practice.

Now that will be truly awesome.

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