

Deck Chairs on the Titanic

Our economic recession and gradual recovery continue to take nearly unprecedented toll on our citizens' health and our nation's prosperity. Indeed, together with job insecurity and unemployment, another 14,000 Americans lose their health care coverage each day. The American Public Health Association calculates that by year end, 50 million of our fellow citizens will have no source of health insurance, up from the dangerously high record number of 46 million at the end of 2008. This, of course, does not even count the estimated 25 million additional Americans who go uninsured for part of a year or who are underinsured and cannot afford to pay the cost of needed treatment and medications. Every one percent increase in the unemployment rate causes about 1.1 million new people to join the ranks of the uninsured. All of us know someone whose financial security is threatened by serious illness or whose health might suffer the aftershock of disappearing earnings. You and I could be next.

Clearly, there is a reciprocal relationship between wealth (or, at least, employment) and health. As workers at all income levels lose jobs and job security, they also lose adequate health insurance coverage and are forced to make risky decisions about if, when and how much they can allocate to preventive, urgent or chronic health care expenses for themselves and their family. They also lose their personal dignity as productive citizens and family providers. As mental health stress increases (and one quarter of all Americans suffer a diagnosable mental disorder in a given year – mental illness has become the leading cause of disability among 15-44 year olds in the U.S. – American children are prescribed psychotropic medications at a rate 4-5 times higher than most western European countries), chronic health problems mount. When health suffers, the cost burden to hospitals, businesses and the public treasury rises exponentially. Exponentially, because the cost of treating and reversing chronically deteriorating health becomes increasingly complex, less effective and much more expensive. Indeed, many states report that health problems are the number one cause of personal bankruptcy.

Did you know that the number of American workers with employer-based health coverage has been steadily dropping over the past eight years? No doubt accelerated by the current downturn in the economy, such reductions in health care benefits have resulted in fewer people receiving or purchasing private health insurance. Currently, only 58% of Americans have private coverage. Half that number, 87.4 million or nearly 30% of all Americans in 2008, are covered by government health insurance. This number is also rising as our population grows poorer and older. Medicaid enrollment increased by 3 million members last year while Medicare subscribers rose by more than 1.5 million.

One silver lining in the menacing cloud of health vulnerability, thankfully, rests in the fact that we are taking more and more public responsibility for the health and well-being of children. Last year alone, nearly one million more children were protected with publicly financed health insurance than were covered in 2007. The overall uninsurance rate for children is at its lowest point since 1987. Still, 7.3 million children are uninsured in the United States of America (woefully, Florida accounts for 10% of the nation's total number of uninsured children!). Children living in poverty are less likely to have coverage and, tragically, more children slipped into poverty last year. In fact, poverty rates increased for many groups of Americans, including whites, Asians, Hispanics, people ages 18-64, and those who live in southern and western states.

If we do nothing, if we as a nation allow more citizens to lose health security, we will slow or reverse our economic recovery and, in the process, lose our global advantage as the leading engine and inspirational model of prosperity, peace and justice. Fortunately, we are having a spirited national debate at this very moment about how to reverse the human and financial burden of increasingly unaffordable health care. Almost nobody believes that the current system works for most Americans. Still, legislators and policy analysts cannot agree on a best method of financing and providing health care services in a way that will create efficiencies, improve outcomes, and serve all citizens equitably. I won't second guess the healthcare economists. As a healthcare professional, however, I will suggest that whatever system we choose to replace or revise our current one, its success will depend on our willingness to redirect resources from the treatment of entrenched disease to the promotion of health. National wealth depends on our commitment to promoting universal health. As we learn the wisdom of providing primary, community-based care to every child, over time we will outgrow the epidemic dependence of adults on costly prescription medication and hospital-based hi-tech interventions. Indeed, all the other members of the fraternity of wealthy G-20 nations provide free or low cost preventive, primary health care to every citizen and they enjoy better health and longer lives than do Americans for less than half the cost of the U.S. system (now approaching one fifth of our GNP!). The practical solution is to regard health care as a human right, accessible and affordable to everybody and essential to preserving the quality of our lives, liberties and pursuits of happiness. Anything less would be like rearranging the deck chairs as we sink beyond rescue.

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