

Above All, Do No Harm!

☒ Last week I shared a very personal story of my struggle with both cancer and the insurance companies. My doctors informed me that I had two near-death experiences along with a mini-stroke that temporarily caused the right side of my body including my face, arm and leg to be paralyzed. Although I am fine now, that was a scary season in my life.

During my health challenges I met scores of foreigners at Johns Hopkins, hoping the American doctors could save them. Middle Easterners, South Americans and Europeans were among those that frequented various Hopkins departments. Surprisingly the day I met with my surgeon to lay out the plan for my surgery, an aging man all the way from Hong Kong sat with several family members waiting to see my internationally known doctor.

Whether we want to admit it or not, the flawed American healthcare system has developed the best doctors in the world. Had my hospital not been on its game, I would not be here today. Many Americans could say the same. Our most obvious challenge is how we give access to everyone who needs help, while maintaining the best treatment in the world.

It seems to me that the healthcare reforms currently offered by the administration may have deadly consequences for the average person. Delay and denial of services will literally spell death for thousands. What is most disappointing about the healthcare debate today is that it has deteriorated to partisan wrangling in which the common good is often forgotten.

Healthcare continues to bounce from corner to corner of the political spectrum as opinions fly instead of real answers.

The Democrats are continuing town hall meetings to rally support for the president's health care legislation. They have been met with jeers, taunts and in one case effigy. Despite Democratic public relations efforts, citizens have lots of questions. In fact people have so many questions that the chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Maryland Rep. Chris Van Hollen, stated that vulnerable Democrats have scheduled more than 1,000 meetings this month. Every week I hear a new complaint about the ramifications of President Barack Obama's plan. Last week thousands spoke out against the idea of government-sponsored insurance that includes abortion. This week Sarah Palin attacked the administration's plan because she believes her Down syndrome baby's care would be based on his "level of productivity." She called the policy "down right evil." Palin stated that there would be a "death panel" which would determine the fate of children like hers.

One can only wonder what nuance of the plan will be criticized next week. Although the administration has attempted to cast these concerns as part of a partisan anti-Obama campaign, I think the healthcare problems are part of a big systemic problem that occurs when one party controls most of the votes in Congress.

Ideologically based solutions that are not properly vetted out sometimes are pushed forward because of legislators' party allegiance instead of rigorous bipartisan analysis. When this happens, half-baked ideas are passed off as solutions. Opponents are demonized, and the people are short changed. Several recent polls, however, indicate that many Americans are not comfortable with the healthcare plan as it stands. The most vigorous debate is whether one of the options would be a government-run insurance company. At this time, a government-run insurance option will not pass in Congress.

From where I sit several things are obvious – our healthcare system is expensive and inefficient. Because of the inherent inefficiencies that a government-run system will incur, the administration's plan will ultimately increase costs,

producing staggering deficits, give less healthcare options and thus lower the quality of our care. As a grassroots leader who has started many new programs, innovation works best when it is built with proven building blocks. In other words, we should test, explore, examine and then implement best practices. The rate and the pace of these changes reflect the problems of having a genius-prone president who lacks proven field generals to implement his plans. Proven plans with a twist would be better than reinventing the wheel.

We as citizens must demand that Congress take things step by step. Let's first strip away the inefficiencies in our current system before attempting to dramatically improve what we have. Next let's encourage the best doctors in the world to remain the best. For example, the threat of malpractice alone pressures doctors into ordering unnecessary procedures. One doctor friend of mine stated, "Even the families of 80-year-old patients may sue you because of unrealistic expectations. When things go bad, they always think you could have done more." Because they are trying to cover themselves, some estimate that 25 percent of the total prescribed procedures may be unnecessary.

Finally patient choice must be preserved. The system has to be adjusted so that a person receives compensation in order to choose their own healthcare provider. In my case, had I chosen the wrong hospital, I would be singing in the heavenly choir. For many people, the healthcare choice may insure life, while healthcare denial or delay may spell death.

Let's let our representatives know! Call or write your congressman and senator today!

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