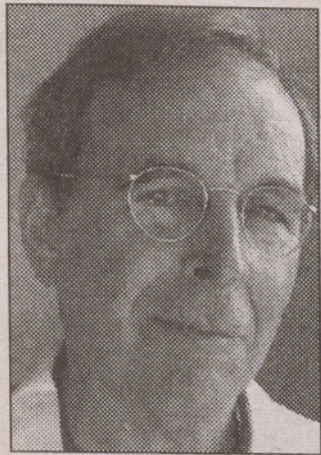


The health care debate isn't over: Let your voice be heard



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BY SAM METZ
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Does the specter of your family going bankrupt from a disease not covered by your health insurance keep you staring sleeplessly at the ceiling? Have you lost hope that our country will ever get the health care system we need?

There is a solution, and you can make it happen.

It is single-payer health care. Single payer applies the common characteristics of every successful health care system: (1) It includes everyone without discrimination against the sick, (2) it encourages patients to seek health care at the first suspicion of trouble, and (3) it finances health care with publicly accountable, transparent, not-for-profit agencies.

Will single-payer health care really work?

It already works. Around the world and in our own country, single-payer systems provide better care to more people for less money than our American insurance industry.

Example: Our Veterans Affairs system cares for America's sickest patients with the best outcomes at the lowest cost with the highest patient satisfaction in the country. The VA is a single payer system.

Example: Almost every large American corporation abandons private health insurance and adopts their own single payer system (called "self-funding").

Example: Nearly 40 percent of Americans already receive great health care through private and public single payer systems (through corporate self-funded plans, the VA, Medicare, etc.).

For those still skeptical, there are over 25 economic studies of statewide and nationwide single-payer proposals. All conclude single-payer will provide better care to its patients with better results at lower cost than any other proposal. There are no studies concluding single-payer cannot work.

Many free market advocates still cling to the desperate hope that the American private insurance industry will save us by doing more of what it has done for the past 60 years. This hope is misplaced. Never in recorded history has an American-style private insurance system reduced costs or improved health. Perhaps Neanderthals did so and simply forgot to write it down - but I doubt it.

Can you help Congress create a single payer system?

Let's review three bill being considered right now in Washington.

HR 676, the Expanded & Improved Medicare for All Act, introduced in the House by Rep. John Conyers, would create America's first nationwide single-payer system. Unfortunately, none of its 76 co-sponsors are Oregonians. Let's correct that oversight with vigorous letters from readers urging them to sign on now. For more information, please visit www.healthcare-now.org/whats-single-payer/hr-676.

Our own Sen. Ron Wyden plus Republican Sen. Scott Brown introduced the "Empowering States to Innovate Act." The Affordable Care Act prevents states from creating any plan other than health exchanges without a waiver. Currently, states must wait until 2017 to receive one. The Wyden-Brown bill moves that date to 2014. For more information, please see the fact sheet on the Affordable Care Act in the press section of www.whitehouse.gov.

This is a great time to remind our Sen. Jeff Merkley to sign as a co-sponsor.

Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Jim McDermott introduced more powerful legislation. The American Health Security Act of 2011 requires every state to create its own single-payer program. To sweeten the deal, the bill turns over all federal health care dollars in the state to the single payer agency. Every resident then receives publicly funded health care, prepaid with both federal and state tax dollars.

This legislation has no co-sponsors in the Senate and only nine in the House - again, none from Oregon. Every Oregon senator and representative should receive letters from readers encouraging them to sign. To learn more, please visit the Physicians for National Health Program website at www.pnhp.org.

As can be seen, we may have an All-Chicago World Series before Washington produces useful legislation.

Does single payer stand a better chance 3,000 miles away in Oregon?

Yes. In March of 2011, the Oregon House Health Committee held a hearing on House Bill 3510, the "Affordable Health Care for All Oregon Plan" submitted by State Rep. Michael Dembrow. This hearing attracted statewide testimony and attention. Although the bill did not move out of committee, it gained widespread exposure and was

endorsed by more than 40 organizations. Rep. Dembrow will resubmit his bill again in the 2013 legislative session. Wouldn't it be great if your state representative knew how you feel about this bill?

To find out how I feel about the bill, please see my written testimony at www.samuelmetz.com/reference/110311testimony.htm.

What can readers do right now? A lot. It's time to get fired up.

Step 1: Write!

Write your state senators and representatives a simple, three sentence letter. First - this is how our current health care system is destroying my life, my family, my business, or my clients. Second - I want Oregon to have publicly funded health care. Last - I want you to make it happen. Then sign it, "Sincerely, your constituent. PS. If you want my vote in the next election, you'll tell me what you'll do about it."

Don't be shy about writing again in a few months.

Imagine every legislator in Salem getting 10 letters like that in a week. And every week after that for the rest of their term. It certainly gets the message across that health care reform cannot be ignored.

Step 2: Join!

Join groups working for single-payer health care. Fortunately, Oregon is blessed with an exemplary organization: Health Care for All Oregon (visit www.HCAO.org). HCAO represents more than 60 Oregon groups who advocate publicly funded universal care. I highly recommend readers visit the site and discover what they can do personally to make universal care a reality in Oregon.

Full disclosure: I represent the Portland Chapter of Physicians for a National Health Program to HCAO.

Step 3: Don't accept "No"!

If your state legislator complains they are helpless, tell them to contact Health Care for All Oregon. We'll tell them what they need to do, and in no uncertain terms.

Oregon legislators cannot ignore their constituents. Every reader is someone's constituent. If you think single-payer health care in Oregon is vitally urgent, make sure your state legislator understands this clearly. Oregon is riding a crest of activism and we want the waves to wash across the Capitol floors.

We can make a difference.

We can leave our children a better world.

And we can bring to our families the health care we need and deserve.

This article is the last of four to appear in Street Roots. If you have questions about this essay, you may find the previous three to be helpful. Please visit streetroots.wordpress.com.



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A special thanks to all of our volunteers who are helping us through a busy holiday season. Thank you everyone - you make a world of difference!



Catch up on Dr. Samuel Metz's series on progressive moves in health care at www.streetroots.wordpress.com