

Wellness Programs Will Transform US Health care

WASHINGTON – Undoing Obamacare is proving to be a lot more complicated than what confident President Trump (and the Republicans in Congress) had anticipated. The problem is that it turns out that most Americans want universal health insurance and affordable health coverage –the promise of Obamacare. But they do not want to pay what it costs to obtain medical care in our horrendously complicated and super expensive system.

A political problem

And this creates an insoluble political problem for the Republicans now in charge. It is clearly impossible to yank coverage away from previously uncovered Americans who got used to getting significant health care benefits thanks to Obamacare. Many get benefits at a deep discount, because of subsidies granted to low income people. At the same time, there is no easy way to reduce the cost of coverage to all those who have seen their premiums go up in the last few years because of unforeseen systemic cost increases.

We have created a monster

That said, if we distance ourselves for a moment from the political infighting that focuses almost entirely on who gets what coverage and who will pay for it, we see that the entire U.S. health care system –before Obamacare and after– is in fact a true monstrosity. We have created a real Frankenstein. Physicians get paid only if they treat patients. Most patients do not pay because they have insurance.

And, to top it all off, the overall health of most Americans has deteriorated because of widespread bad habits involving a horrible diet and no exercise. There you have it. A medical

profession that thrives on insured sick people and not even a semblance of any wellness education program aimed at keeping people healthy. The outcome? America spends about 18% of its GDP on health care –a stupendous amount– while Americans are not at all healthy.

A flawed system

The reason for this veritable disaster is that the entire health care edifice is built on terrible premises. The first one is that American physicians are mostly self-employed professionals who make money only when you –the patient– are sick. They have no financial interest in keeping you healthy. In fact, the opposite applies. If you are healthy, they get no revenue from you.

The second one is that when most people are sick, in most cases someone else pays the cost, i.e. health insurance. And so we have created a perverse system with perverse incentives.

Fix what is broken

Physicians deal with you –the patient– just like an auto mechanic deals with your car when you bring it to their workshop. They look at what's wrong with your vehicle, identify the problem, and try to fix it through a repair. And off you go, until the next time you have another problem, (hopefully soon).

The difference between auto mechanics and doctors is that when you go to the mechanic you pay with your own money. Whereas, in the health care system in most instances someone else (the health insurance that covers you) pays the bill.

We love sick people

Given the way this system works, (captive customers who send the bill to a third party) most American doctors have a built in incentive to over treat you; because this how they make

extra money. And they believe they can do this because they know you will not feel the financial pain of the cost of the cure, thanks to your health insurance that will pay your bills.

Hence the widespread tendency to over prescribe almost anything: ordering batteries of diagnostic tests, new procedures, often unneeded surgeries, and what not. And why would doctors do that? Very simple: because this is how they make money! And they have few disincentives, because they know that in most instances their insurance-covered patients –that would be you– do not pay, or pay only a fraction of what the doctor charges.

No interest in prevention

By the same token, given the fact that sick patients bring revenue, while healthy people do not, most physicians do not have any interest whatsoever in advising you about ways that will help you improve your life style and habits, so that you maximize your chances to stay healthy, especially as you get older.

On the contrary, they truly benefit from you when your bad habits cause you to be sick more often. Better yet, the ideal customer is a patient with multiple chronic afflictions –many of them caused by widespread bad life style habits, such as over eating, eating unhealthy food, drinking too much alcohol, doing drugs, not exercising. In fact, the more the chronic afflictions, the better. If you are chronically ill, this means that you are and will be a permanent source of income, because your chronic ailments require constant (expensive) treatments and monitoring, possibly for life.

Cost explosion

That said, this situation, while ideal for physicians, created a gigantic problem. America has the dubious distinction of having the highest health care costs in the entire world, (as

a percentage of national wealth), when compared with all other developed, rich nations that provide high quality care to their citizens.

And the cost of health care delivery keeps going up because it is almost unchecked, given the perverse incentive to do “more” of everything to people who do not pay directly. And all this is happening while Americans are becoming more and more unhealthy because of the explosion of otherwise preventable ailments –think type 2 diabetes– due to bad personal habits when it comes to diet and exercise.

However, while armies of now chronically ill patients get treatment, the health insurance industry has difficulties in trying to remain profitable, while containing costs. Inevitably, the additional costs of care are passed on to the insured individuals. Feeling the pressure of higher insurance premiums, the people turn to the politicians so that they will “do something” in order to make good health care available to all, and truly affordable for all.

Nice idea. However, if we leave the fundamentals of the system just as they are now, there is in fact no way out.

There is a way out

A solution does indeed exist. But it would require a complete revolution affecting the entire American health care structure.

However, this would require a new national consensus about the true purpose of medicine. Medicine should be indeed about curing sick people. But, most of all, it should be seen as an integral part of a broad effort aimed at teaching people how to be and stay healthy. And this includes practicing proper nutrition, avoiding all addictions, and having plenty of good exercise.

Reduce ailments by teaching wellness

Of course, good habits will not make all illnesses or accidents-caused trauma go away. Of course not. But they would greatly reduce and eventually do away with the national epidemics of chronic diseases –first and foremost type 2 diabetes and a variety of cardiovascular afflictions – caused primarily by bad personal habits. Believe it or not, treating millions of people who are chronically ill mostly because they do not know how to live a healthier life costs hundreds of billions of dollars every year. Most of this money could be saved, thereby reducing the overall costs of care.

Rewards for keeping people healthy

And here is how it would work. In the future, physicians would be employed by health maintenance facilities that would reward them financially for being proactive and successful in keeping their patients healthy. In the current system healthy patients are actually a problem for doctors who make money only when they can provide services. In the future, healthy people who stay healthy should become symbols of medical achievement.

In a sane world we want healthy people to stay healthy. Think about it. The individual is in good shape, feeling healthy, strong and energetic. She or he can devote all their energies to leading a productive life, as opposed to worrying about diabetes and hypertension.

Costs would go down

As a result of a well structured national education program focused on wellness, the total cost of health care delivery would fall dramatically, because the millions of chronically ill patients who drive up the costs would eventually become healthy and therefore in no need of constant, expensive medical attention.

Below you can see practical illustrations of how wellness and prevention programs will help contain health care costs. The compilation listed here is drawn from various sources. Keep in

mind that the figures provided about cost savings are estimates. They may be inaccurate.

Still you will get an idea of the cause and effect connection between changed personal habits coupled with intelligent prevention programs and significant cost savings for the entire U.S. health care system.

Wellness programs and prevention save money

- *For every HIV infection prevented, an estimated \$355,000 is saved in the cost of providing lifetime HIV treatment.*
- *A proven program that prevents type 2 diabetes may save costs within three years. One of every five U.S. health care dollars is spent on caring for people with diagnosed diabetes. People who increased physical activity (2½ hours a week) and had 5 to 7 percent weight loss reduced their risk of developing type 2 diabetes by 58 percent regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender.*
- *A 5 percent reduction in the prevalence of hypertension would save \$25 billion in 5 years.*
- *Annual health care costs are \$2,000 higher for smokers, \$1,400 higher for people who are obese, and \$6,600 higher for those who have diabetes than for nonsmokers, people who are not obese, or people do not have diabetes.*
- *A 1 percent reduction in weight, blood pressure, glucose, and cholesterol risk factors would save \$83 to \$103 annually in medical costs per person.*
- *Increasing use of preventive services, including tobacco cessation screening, alcohol abuse screening and aspirin use, to 90 percent of the recommended levels could save \$3.7 billion annually in medical costs.*
- *Medical costs are reduced by approximately \$3.27 for every dollar spent on workplace wellness programs, according to a recent study.*
- *Dietary sodium is linked to increased prevalence of*

hypertension, a primary risk factor for cardiovascular and renal diseases. Cardiovascular disease alone accounts for nearly 20 percent of medical expenditures and 30 percent of Medicare expenditures.

- *Reducing average population sodium intake to 2,300 milligrams per day could save \$18 billion in health care costs annually.*
- *Tobacco use accounts for 11 percent of Medicaid costs and nearly 10 percent of Medicare costs.*
- *Tobacco screening is estimated to result in lifetime savings of \$9,800 per person.*

Prevention increases productivity

- *Indirect costs to employers of employee poor health—lower productivity, higher rates of disability, higher rates of injury, and more workers' compensation claims—can be two to three times the costs of direct medical expenses.*
- *Asthma, high blood pressure, smoking, and obesity each reduce annual productivity by between \$200 and \$440 per person.*
- *Workers with diabetes average two more work days absent per year than workers without diabetes.*
- *Absenteeism costs are reduced by approximately \$2.73 for every dollar spent on workplace wellness programs, according to a recent study.*
- *Research from the Milken Institute suggests that a modest reduction in avoidable risk factors could lead to a gain of more than \$1 trillion annually in labor supply and efficiency by 2023.*

Wellness programs are the solution

Anyway, you get the picture. The point here is that U.S. policy-makers need to understand that as long as they battle with one another trying to determine who will pay what part of a horrendously flawed system there will be no real

transformation. Only some more patches to an inherently bad system.

Re-frame the health care debate

As a society we have to recognize that we really have to change our parameters. We have to understand that it is absolutely essential to teach people how to stay healthy, as opposed to spending 18% of our GDP to treat armies of chronically ill citizens who could learn how to practice good habits that would keep them healthy.