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## **Doctors, Single Payer Activists Arrested**

by Donna Smith

It has finally happened right here in the United States. Citizens who believe healthcare is a human right have been arrested and are being processed like criminals through the Southeast District of Columbia police station. Their crime? Asking for single payer healthcare reform - publicly funded, privately delivered healthcare - to be discussed during the Congressional hearings on reform.

Doctors and other single payer activists were handcuffed and went to jail today speaking up for single payer to be at the table in the Senate finance Committee's roundtable discussion on healthcare access and coverage. In stark contrast, Karen Ignagni, head of the industry lobby group American Health Insurance Plans (AHIP) was escorted into the room like royalty by staff members of the Senate committee. Clearly, the position of the United States Senate is not with the majority of Americans who support a national, public insurance system.

It made me physically ill to see Maryland pediatrician Margaret Flowers cuffed like a criminal and pushed out the door as the Senators waited to begin their staged roundtable discussion. It made me want to scream. It made me proud of them for being bold but ashamed that not one Senator spoke up for their own citizen-protestors and asked that they at least be allowed to speak. But the insistence that the citizens rising in protest be arrested continued from the chair with each incident.

Simply asking to have single payer be included and fully vetted is a crime. Profiting as the for-profit health insurance companies do at the expense of 22,000 American lives every year, however, gets you a run of the table in this healthcare reform discussion. Just ask the Senators who are drafting what this nation's health system will look like - and watch their behavior today - if you want evidence of how your voice will be heard in the process.

The protestors were stoic and respectful but direct. One by one they stood. One by one they asked why single payer reform was not "at the table" of 15 witnesses Senator Max Baucus and his finance Committee gathered to map out what sort of coverage Americans might expect in the Senate reform bill now being crafted.

Sen. Baucus eventually spoke and indicated that he was respectful of those who believe in single payer - as he acknowledged many of his constituents in Montana do - but he made no attempt to explain why no single payer voice has been included in any Senate discussion to date. He urged any others in the audience who might have any designs on speaking up like the protestors did to not do so, and then he moved on to his roundtable discussion.

The press seated comfortably at the press table first looked amused and then puzzled by the procession of protest in the chamber. The C-SPAN cameras fixed on both the Committee's table at the front of the room and the witness table directly across from them could have easily picked up the protests but the network chose to keep their cameras fixed only on Chairman Baucus - though the protestors' words could be heard in the audience. Only two reporters of the 20 or so assembled were curious enough or industrious enough to rise and exit the room to see the arrests being carried out in the hallway.

While neither the Finance Committee or the press allowed their proceedings to be disrupted for very long, the air in the room and the atmosphere had changed -- the giddy and gleeful assembly of industry lobbyists who had been chattering in rapt anticipation of the coming of their carefully chosen witnesses could not deny that some brave and patriotic fellow citizens had just been hauled out for arrest for nothing more than demanding that a point of view held by a majority of patients, nurses, physicians and other healthcare providers be included in the national discussion.

While this Congress may pass something very different than single payer reform, it will not do so without hearing the cries of the people left so openly exposed to personal health and financial ruin by the corrupt system that celebrates only profit. The citizens who stood for the thousands and thousands of dead today will not let this democracy give itself completely over to the big money interests in healthcare. Not without a fight. Not on their lives or yours or mine.

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